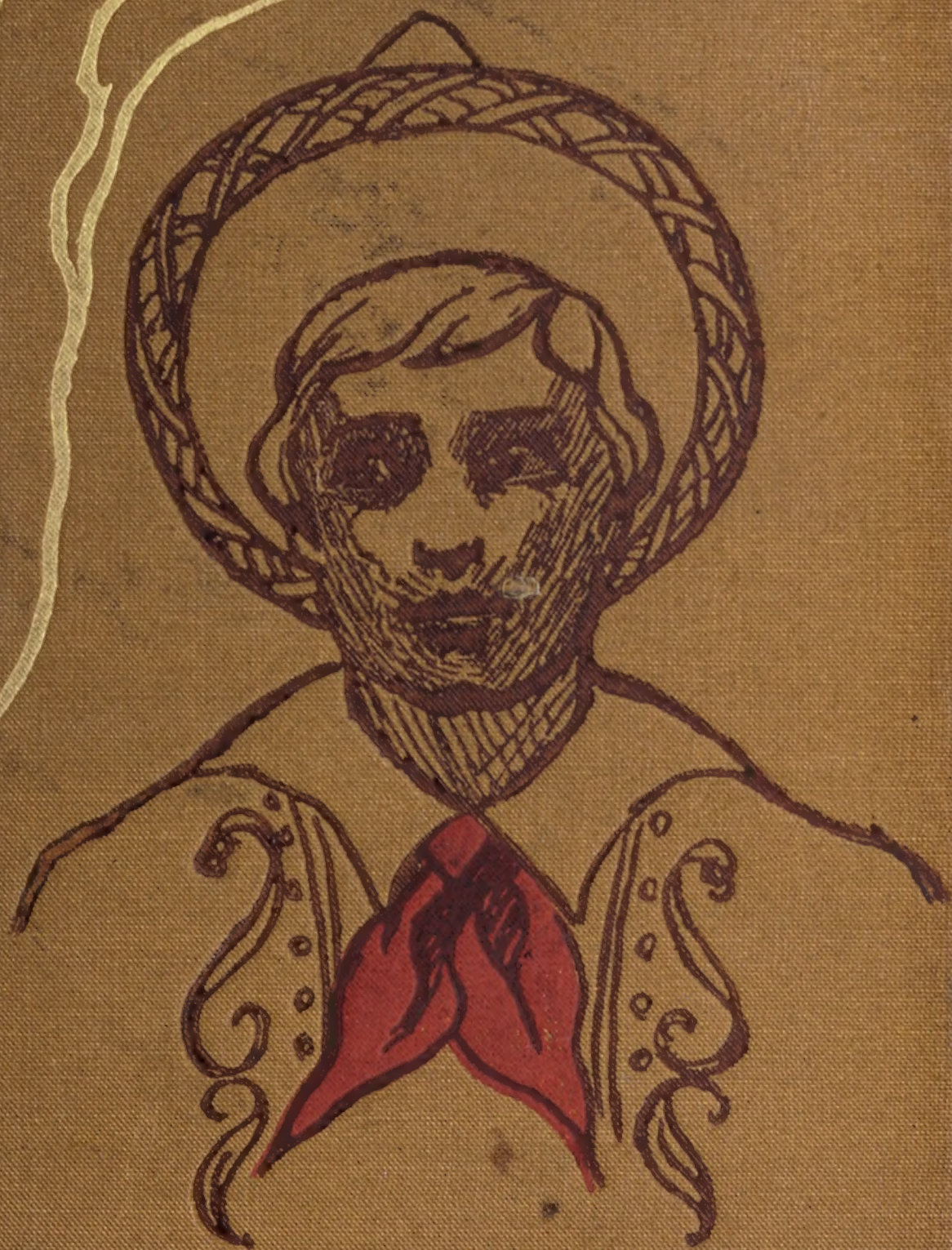



*AN IDOL
OF BRONZE.*



LOUISE PALMER HEAVEN.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2018 with funding from
University of Toronto

An Idol of Bronze

COMMITTED TO HIS CHARGE

A Canadian Romance

BY

KATE and ROBINA LIZARS

Crown 8vo, cloth, 6s.

Athenæum.—‘This book is decidedly interesting. The authors have a very pleasant gift of gaiety and an agreeable way of expressing themselves.’

Daily News.—‘Both interesting and amusing.’

Record.—‘Very clever and humorous.’

Daily Graphic.—‘A clever and entertaining novel.’

Christian World.—‘The incidents connected with the four years’ rectorship of Tom Huntley are cleverly arranged and as cleverly told. . . . We have nothing but praise for this book, which is strongly suggestive of George Eliot’s “Scenes from Clerical Life.”’

AN IDOL OF BRONZE

By

LOUISE PALMER HEAVEN

Author of 'Chata and Chinita'

Canada

GEO. N. MORANG & CO., LTD.

TORONTO

LONDON: GREENING & CO., LTD.

1901

[All Rights reserved]

COPYRIGHT
IN
GREAT BRITAIN
IN
THE DOMINION OF CANADA
AND IN
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

An Idol of Bronze

CHAPTER I

UPON the western slope of Southern Mexico the Titans wrestled long ages ago, and since they passed away Mother Nature has never had the heart to set in order their devastated and deserted playground. Great ridges of bare rock piled with volcanic boulders intersect the valleys, which are rich with tropical verdure. River courses, which have rent deep scars upon the mountain sides, are traced across the lowlands by wide wastes of sand or by lines of trees which throw pendant arms from their gnarled trunks to grasp the soil, and form webs of roots amid which riot flowering vines. Birds are there, and countless butterflies that mock the flowers by their brightness; and serpents and lizards glide silently like glints from iridescent metal. Cat-like animals crouch in the shadows.

During nine months of the year the unclouded splendour of a sky of shimmering blue arches the giant mountain peaks, the jungles and the deep glens, through which water flows like the slenderest sliding thread. For the other three months clouds of purple, rent by lightning and tumultuous with the roar and crack of thunder, pour down floods of rain, which wash and tear every loosened atom from the cliffs, and fill the beds of the rivers with raging torrents and the *débris* of forest, swamp and field.

Though no scene more beautiful may be found upon earth, there are few spots in this chaos of loveliness where man has made his home. The '*barrancas*' or mountain defiles are '*tierra del Gobierno*,' literally no man's land.

Southward two mountain ranges diverge sufficiently to allow a deep valley to stretch like a broad ribbon, which curves and twines with the sinuosities of the rocky boundaries, and there signs of human habitation appear.

This inland haven or bay is flanked upon the east by frowning cliffs. Upon the west, the heights have sunk under volcanic fires to a ridge of hummocks.

Upon this hardened scoria, where nothing

more delicate than the great organ cactus or the common '*tuna*' will grow, the little village of Cruz-Roja has stood for generations. It is a tiny trading place, holding itself scorchingly aloof from the coolness and verdure of the valley it overlooks. Its few inhabitants, though their characteristics are more those of the Indian than Castilian, claim, for the most part, distant kinship with the lordly '*hacendados*' or land-owners of the district. But they have little in common with them except their names and their pride. They form, however, a critical public in the consideration of all matters of local interest, and the '*hacendados*,' while carrying themselves haughtily, never cease to be conscious of the censorship of the folk of the '*pueblo*.'

On the side of the valley opposite Cruz-Roja stands—loftiest and grandest—on the line of bare and precipitous peaks, that one which is known as '*el pico del hambre*'—the '*peak of hunger*.' At the tree level, so that before them is a mass of green and at their rear gray and frowning rock ; rise the white walls and square towers of a collection of massive buildings.

These buildings were erected more than three hundred years ago by the followers of Cortez, and named San Juan de Tlaltelzingo. Their balconied windows glow like fires in the setting

sun, and the tall bronze crosses upon the church towers rise like beacons. Their glory is reflected upon the lowly thatched roofs of the peasant village that is clustered around the battlemented walls of the great square. A massive arch in which are hung impregnable doors of cedar, riveted with iron, supports the centre of the principal dwelling ; and through it, admittance is gained within the fortress-like walls. Sloping downward from the roadway that winds like a broad strip of pale ochre up from the valley are groves of oranges, coffee and rare woods, with thickets of flowering shrubs and vines.

Farther still from Cruz-Roja, and in a lesser vale, is Santa-Trinita, the only neighbour and rival of Tlaltelzingo. It is the estate of the family of Sanchez y Berganza. Though of smaller acreage and commanding a less extensive view, it is rich in corn and sugar lands ; and is begirt with groves as fruitful and beautiful as those of the greater hacienda.

Those two great estates embrace all the fertile lands of the district for a hundred or more square miles ; and all the people dwelling in the valleys or upon the foothills are their tenants. The Valdivias of Tlaltelzingo are the lords of Cruz-Roja. There is a tiny hamlet miles away that

owns no other law than the will of Sanchez. As for the mountain peaks, the lawless of both houses occasionally invade them, but for the most part iguanas and serpents, and a few furry folk occupy them undisturbed.

Santa-Trinita, in common with most of the isolated haciendas of Mexico always, had its legends of horror and mystery, but of Tlaltelzingo a decade ago there was nothing to learn or tell but the most commonplace gossip. The worst said of it was that the former owner, Don Juan, and his brother Don Isidor, who still survived, had in their young days been too fond of gay life in the metropolis, and too much given to playing *monte* with their neighbour of Santa-Trinita, who was exceptionally lucky.

Don Juan had died young. His wife had soon followed. Their two children, the present owners of the estate, had been brought up in strict seclusion by their grandmother, the Senora Rodriguez, and their uncle Isidor, the reformed rake.

The only associate of the young couple was their neighbour and creditor, the youthful owner of Santa-Trinita. This young man, Norberto Sanchez y Berganza, was assigned by popular rumour to be the destined husband of Carmen Valdivia. The union would cancel the heavy

debt still partly unpaid, which had been incurred by Don Juan ; and join in one the two haciendas. Don Isidor was credited with originating this design, which had met with the approbation of the Senora Rodriguez. The acquiescence of the principals was taken for granted.

All this was of the most commonplace ; and if the haciendas had remained in their accustomed isolation the matter might have reached an untroubled and speedy conclusion. But on an 'evil day,' as the Senora Rodriguez named it, a band of hurrying, inquisitive Americans, bearing theodolite and chain, came out from the mountain passes and laid out the route for the wonderful iron road which was to revolutionise the trade and life of the entire district. Those Americans worked as well as they talked, and almost before the people recovered from the surprise their appearance and words had excited, labourers with pick and shovel and many more curious appliances succeeded them, and it was not long before the track of timbers and steel lay like a gleaming serpent across the scoria of the foothills.

Great as was the curiosity and distrust which the sight of the road created, it was feeble, indeed, compared with the consternation that seized the public mind when the first train reached

Cruz-Roja. Even those who had imagined themselves fully prepared fled precipitately. The old women, clasping the younger by the hand, rushed to the church, and crowded around the altar, calling upon the Blessed Virgin for protection. The men dropped upon their knees on the roadways, and crossed themselves devoutly.

At Tlaltelzingo the excitement was even more intense. The peasantry, the Senora, and in a lesser degree Don Isidor, were filled with dismay. But the young owners, Fernando and Carmen, rejoiced in the prospect of a speedy and novel means of escape from the seclusion in which they had lived, with no interruption except an occasional visit to a little mountain town, and that only at rare intervals.

Tlaltelzingo is ten miles as the crow flies from Cruz-Roja, and perhaps thirty or more by the circuitous route through cañon, swamp and river. The means for freighting or travel are most primitive and dangerous, but, such as they are, they have the sanction of tradition and custom.

The sallying forth of pack trains from the great courtyards, at irregular intervals, are events of intense interest in hacienda life. The burden that every animal can bear is exactly cal-

culated, and the endurance and courage of every muleteer is commented upon. To see them—beasts and men—pass out under the archway, to watch them disappear and reappear as they descend the wooded descent to the valley, meander across the lowlands, plunge into the cañons, and reappear for the last time upon the distant ridges, is a never-failing source of pleasure and excitement. In the past, to follow in thought the adventurous journey had been a sure source of interest, now eliminated for ever.

When the first onlookers, gentle and simple, beheld from Tlaltelzingo the mighty engine and the swaying segments of the train whirl across the horizon, they shuddered with the awe of fear and mystery. The floating trail of black smoke, its taint upon the air, its shadow upon the herbage, seemed to them like that of some vampire or demon, before which their simple delights were to perish. The scream of the whistle and the reverberations from the iron wheels were more terrifying than the subterranean mutterings and quiverings of the snow-clad volcano that reared its crest against the sky.

For some weeks after the trains made their daily stops at the little station, no one, of the many persons who assembled at Cruz-Roja to admire and wonder, and at length, timidly offer

their fruits and flowers for sale, found sufficient courage to try the new mode of travel. The peasants stoically made their pilgrimages on foot or upon the backs of their patient donkeys. The aristocrats still drove by in their antiquated carriages, with disdain even greater than their discomfort.

But at last one and another weary woman stole shamefacedly into a second-class compartment, and then the men grew bolder, and before long the cars were daily laden with common folk, who proclaimed the merits and delights of *el ferro carril*.

Fernando Valdivia often, and more than once his uncle, Don Isidor, rode down to the track and gazed longingly at the train as it thundered by. When the last echo ceased they turned gloomily homeward. Fernando was lord of thousands of acres and hundreds of peasants, who were little more than serfs ; he was, moreover, of an aggressive and wilful nature, yet custom and etiquette held him subservient to the will of the domestic autocrat—his grandmother. Power comes late in life to Mexican women. They wield it rigorously, and it is loyally acknowledged. That of the Senora, Rodriguez, until the advent of the railroad, had been deferred to with unquestioning courtesy, Carmen alone had

sometimes frowned where she should have smiled.

When those around her vaunted the wonders of the innovation and the benefits of travel, the lips of the old lady closed with contemptuous hardness. She even rebuked their favoured neighbour, Norberto Sanchez, when he observed that he had 'made a trip to the next town with wonderful ease.'

'Ease is for women and infants, not for men,' she said tartly. 'Horses are for cavaliers, and trundle carts for cripples.'

Norberto frowned, Fernando Valdivia laughingly assented. He humoured his grandmother's prejudices so astutely that, insensibly to herself, they began to dwindle, and, at length, she began to combat argument with words, which proved a less surer defence than the panoply of silence she was wont to wear.

It was to Don Isidor that she first betrayed signs of weakening. She shudderingly reminded him that he and his brother, the husband of her favourite daughter, had brought their fortunes to so low an ebb that the economies of years had not retrieved them. Tlaltelzingo was still under the thrall of Santa-Trinita, and would be for the lifetime of Fernando, did not his sister relieve him by giving her hand to Don Norberto, and

the duenna frankly confessed that the young man seemed strangely indifferent to the honour intended for him. What, then, might be the result if Fernando might meet the same ill-fortune which his father and uncle had encountered when they left the safe retreat of their own lands?

The old lady, stern though she was, would not admit that there had been any fault in the character and dispositions of any member of her family. She attributed all the ills of their fortunes to their guilelessness and generosity—traits, she said, which might also bring about the ruin of Fernando. But Don Isidor knew that a taste for extravagant pleasures and the predilection for gambling, which had ruined the father, were the fatal inheritance of the youth, and at first, with much seriousness, set himself to oppose his plans for travel. But the fever of restlessness and the thirst for adventure had not died out in his own blood, and he burned to hear of the gay life which he could never again hope to share.

So, day after day, as the sight of the train flashing across the narrow limits of his vision and into the mysterious world beyond added to the enthusiasm of Fernando, the elder man changed his words of discouragement to vague warnings, tempered with sage advice, hints, perhaps un-

consciously drawn from his own mistakes, and, as an extra precaution, he passively encouraged his niece's daring proposal to accompany her brother.

Fernando's pretext for visiting the city was the sudden need he declared he felt for more extended knowledge of the world, and Carmen's for a stay in some school where she might gain a little of that sprightliness and grace that her aunt Florencia, the wife of a renowned lawyer of the Capital, was constantly writing about. Her grandmother thought her already too frivolous, for Carmen, with no sensible ideas on the question of matrimony or the prosperity of Tlaltelzingo, was content to waive the problem of Norberto Sanchez y Berganza's ultimate intentions, and to encourage him in his careless indifference, though it was not exempt from an assurance that wounded her sensibilities and her pride.

She was of a nature that demanded adoration. Even her grandmother recognised that the attractions of Norberto might be augmented in the eyes of her charge by the illusions of absence. Yet she dreaded for the young girl the influence of modern ideas and methods, and pointed out to her that no place could be more beautiful than Tlaltelzingo—when Carmen had seen others she admitted that—that in no church

could the Holy Virgin be more accessible ; that no gallant could be so handsome or more devoted than Don Norberto—and this Carmen did not articulately deny ; and lastly, that no instructor could be more learned than the hacienda priest, the good padre Nicanor.

But the good man most unexpectedly came to Carmen's assistance, and reminded the Senora that even in the seclusion of Tlaltelzingo something more was desirable in those days for the education of a young lady than to be able to read her breviary, play, mostly by ear, on the piano, and to make wonderful drawn-work.

The Senora gave an unwilling assent, recalling many anecdotes of her early days, when to write was looked upon as tampering with the weapons of the Evil One, and the model woman was, according to the old proverb, '*pierna quebrada y en casa*,' or literally, 'with a broken leg, and at home.'

But Carmen chafed restlessly against the assumption that her sex incapacitated her from travel, or that she could come to harm from seeing the great world. A certain morbidity of disposition which she had evinced from time to time became almost fixed, and her intervals of gaiety were unreasonably wild or palpably feigned. She became an enigma to her relatives,

and Norberto Sanchez, who was too dull and prosaic to set himself to consider the charming riddle, showed a sullen resentment, which the Senora Rodriguez thought it well to appease, before it developed into actual hostility.

A seasonable invitation from Carmen's aunt decided the matter. The journey to the city was agreed to by the Senora on the condition that her granddaughter should enter a Convent school. Then a second discussion followed. The Senora hated and dreaded the new mode of travel. The young people would consent to no other, and finally won the victory.

That the 'nina' Carmen should commit herself to such indescribable risks made her departure from the hacienda a sort of ante-mortem feast. A mass was said in the church. Afterwards the people crowded the gateway and prognosticated the most unheard-of dangers and discomforts. Their shrill voices attuned themselves to the minor notes of the 'vighuelas' and harps, which, according to custom, were played at the sallying forth of members of the aristocratic family. Men shook their heads ominously and the women and children wept, adjuring their young master and mistress not to forget their own '*tierra*' in the distractions of the Capital. The Senora embraced them, the

priest gave his blessing, and the cortège started.

Don Isidor and Fernando led the way on horseback, the carriage, in which were Carmen and her maid, went next ; and an escort of rancheros, dressed in buff leather, brought up the rear. It was an imposing cavalcade. The gentlemen were clothed in close riding suits of sober black, with round buttons of silver set in double rows down the outer seam of the trousers, and upon their short jackets were beautifully moulded busts of cavaliers in burnished metal. They wore wide sombreros of pale grey felt, with 'toques' of silver lace and tassels, and their horses stepped proudly under embossed and silver-garnished saddles and accoutrements. The numerous attendants were, however, far more noticeable than the masters. Their jerkins of buff, their countless buttons, their immense spurs jangling against the pendant ornaments of their saddles, the lassoes coiled at their high saddle-bows, the saddle-cloth of goat skins, the long black hair of which almost swept the roadway, their laced sombreros, and flashing weapons, made a picture of barbaric splendour and menace.

Yet the Valdivias, when they went abroad, were in no danger of assault. They were of too

much importance to be approached upon their own territory by bandits, however daring. Therefore this formidable escort was merely a matter of custom, and had been in no way strengthened in consideration of the fact that (in flat contradiction to the boast of the railway company, that brigandage was impossible in a country traversed by the locomotive) a band of outlaws was known to infest, at the time, the neighbouring hills and the road to Cruz-Roja, which lay through the valley.

Evil omens were far more dreaded for the Senores of Tlaltelzingo than evil men. In Mexico the way the wind blows or the birds fly, the corner of the eye from which an old woman glances, or the foot which first crosses the threshold, are all watched for indications of the future. The cries of certain animals and the songs of certain birds are thought to foretell deaths or marriages. Upon setting forth upon a journey, these auguries are carefully looked for and observed.

Therefore when a child, from one of the cottages that lay under the shadow of the hacienda walls, darted across the road just as the cavalcade was skirting the outer edge of the village ; there was a general cry of dismay. No omen could be more plain. An angel

standing in the way could not have warned it more decisively to return.

Don Isidor drew up his horse with an impatient oath, while he made the sign of the cross, and ordered the entire party to turn back. In some confusion this was done, and presently the procession re-formed at the hacienda gates.

Carmen laughed irreverently when told the cause of their retreat, but did not fail to whisper an *ave*, lest a second interruption should prevent her journey altogether. When her carriage was once more in motion and abreast the grass-roofed hut from which the child of ill omen had issued, she looked at it with some apprehension, lest another of its tiny inmates should rush forth. A half-dozen black heads appeared at different heights in the doorway, but the active little bodies which they crowned were kept at bay by a strong arm, that formed a barricade. It was that of the elder brother.

Carmen knew well this particular hut, and the peasants that lived in it. They were more troublesome than most of the tenants of Tlaltelzingo, for the head of the family was a man of doubtful character, who had come from a distant hacienda and had married a widow with a large family, and of little sense—one of those

good-natured soft creatures, who seem to be created to bring forth a fierce brood, which will at length fall upon and destroy her, and then devour each other. This woman, however, had a champion in her eldest son, who had set himself as a sort of perpetual guard upon her, his first and most wary foe being his stepfather. This Pedro Ortiz was a man whom his neighbours suspected of the vilest crimes, secret murder, arson, and worse, that of being a highwayman being the least, for, as they often remarked, 'a man must provide for his family,' and in his infrequent visits to the hacienda he evinced an entire inaptitude for honest work, therefore plainly would resort to crime.

This was a venial fault, even in the eyes of his stepson; but that Pedro should seek employment in beating and maltreating poor Juana infuriated him. The neighbours thought the son went to excess in his disapprobation. There was a unanimous belief that, however he might offend against good taste, a man had a right to manage his wife as he pleased. Indeed, Juana herself, though her bones and her heart ached, was so thoroughly imbued with the doctrine; that her son's hardest task often was to protect her from her own conscientious weakness. There was a well authenticated tradition that

she had once gone to Don Isidor with a pitiful tale of her husband's indifference.

‘But he maintains you and the children,’ said the Senor.

‘Oh yes, your Grace,’ she answered, telling her innocent white lie, with which she was wont to defend her Pedro among the gossips. ‘Oh yes, your Grace.’

‘Then why do you think he does not care for you?’

‘Because, Senor,’ was the tearful reply, ‘he has not beaten me for a month.’

The son who objected to this method of expressing affection was lounging in the doorway of the hut. He had caught and was holding the offending child, while he restrained its abettors. Carmen laughed as her eyes fell upon him. Her passage was assured. The colour rose in the young man's dark cheek as he caught her glance. He smiled, showing teeth as white as milk. Carmen nodded to him with the careless goodwill of a superior towards a favoured culprit. More than once she had laughingly defended his erratic championship of the simple and lachrymose Juana, and his individuality had aroused her somewhat perverse interest in the doings of the family.

‘He has not a bad face, that Cosme Rul,’ she

observed to her waiting woman, 'nor a stupid look, though they say he is a fool.'

'More rogue than fool,' answered the woman, shrugging her shoulders. 'He is always quarrelling with his stepfather when he is here, but it is known that he was fast friends with Pedro when his mother was first married. Some say his defence of his mother is all a pretence, and that if Pedro is a robber, as Cosme declares, that Cosme himself is no better. He is often away at night when honest folk should be abed, and he knows the haunts of the "ladrones" as well as Pedro himself.'

The subject of these remarks looked after the cortège as it descended the slope, drawing down the heavily fringed lids of his eyes, as Indians affect when they would hide their keen glances of curiosity. Presently he drew a trifle lower the ragged hat that shaded the shock of black hair that lay upon his forehead, and setting down the child, expanded the strong chest that shone like bronze through the rents of his shirt. Straightening his muscular limbs, from which loose cotton trousers were rolled almost to the hips, he glanced at his sandalled feet, and turning into the bushes at the side of the road, followed the party at a steady, untiring trot. Unobserved and unsuspected, he was a wary escort to the

travellers, and left them only when he saw them enter the train.

Every human creature in the village, and all the dogs, gathered at the station to see the Senores of Tlaltelzingo depart. There was no drawing-room car, and the arrangements of the first-class compartment were most primitive, but everything seemed elegant and commodious to the young travellers. They were borne out of sight, smiling with joy and an intoxicating sense of freedom.

Don Isidor found himself wishing he was with them. He turned homeward in an ill-humour, which was not lessened when he came upon Cosme Rul talking with his disreputable stepfather at the river bank.

They were certainly not quarrelling, and parted hastily as he espied them.

‘It is quite true, then,’ he thought, ‘that there is a secret friendship between them. I shall set the “*rurales*” to watch the young fellow as well as the old one, and also upon the first pretext he shall be expelled from the hacienda.’

CHAPTER II

CARMEN VALDIVIA's experience of the wider world she had been so anxious to enter was at first somewhat depressing. She became a pupil in a large convent school, where the discipline was rigid, and she found herself on a level with scores of young girls who quickly strove to disabuse her mind of the creed in which she had been bred—that of the superiority of the Valdivias. She associated with the daughters of Mexicans who possessed pedigrees as long and a pride as great as her own, also with stoical Germans, vivacious French, and practical English and Americans. Except the first, they were all types entirely new to her, as were also the nuns, who, drawn from the four quarters of the globe, attempted to impart an expurgated synopsis of the code of morality and manners of their respective countries to their guileless pupils, with the result that the latter were soon hopelessly confused as to either the line of thought or conduct they should pursue; and inclined

to infect each other with the most tempting and doubtful peculiarities of the civilisations which they represented.

At first the mere curriculum of study, and the effort to accustom herself to her environment, occupied the mind of Carmen exclusively. But she was an apt pupil, and soon found time to speculate upon the many problems of modern life which were specially agitating the progressive circles from which most of her associates came. Throughout the Capital, penetrating even the convent walls, there had suddenly sprung up an almost unreasoning enthusiasm for novelty. The old ideals of Mexican life were overthrown, crushed under the ruin of the power that had created them. In the seclusion of Tlaltelzingo the old aristocratic *régime* had remained untouched by the new Republicanism, both internal and external, that had eddied and surged around it. But in the cities and smaller towns that the railroad had earliest reached, a leaven of unrest had set society in a ferment, and Carmen quickly found herself involved in discussions of problems which had dimly agitated her own mind, but which she had supposed the outcome of her secret discontent,—of that morbidity of which she was so frequently accused. She discovered now that

she was but one of millions of people who, having been virtually formed by the traditions and modes of life of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, suddenly found themselves confronted by the civilisation and social subtleties of the nineteenth.

Carmen, like her associates, knew not what to adopt or what to reject, and those about her were blind guides. Had she been set in a wider sphere, her perplexities would have not been less. Society at large was in its way as uncertain and as mystified as the very school girls, and naturally seized upon the most obvious differences of thought and practice from those to which it had been accustomed as being nearest the line of freedom and progress. In so doing it complacently adopted the more fleeting and aggressive characteristics rather than the solid and enduring foundations of the Anglo-Saxon civilisation, which at best can but form an incongruous union with the ponderous and ornate mechanism of the Latin. The mass of the people founded a complacent belief in the advancement of thought and morale of their country upon their individual alacrity to adopt the luxuries and material advantages that had been brought into it by the influx of foreign capital and energy. This was naturally con-

spicuously evident among the associates of Carmen. Every novelty—of object, manners, and customs—was eagerly adopted, but for the most part their old prejudices and principles were tenaciously, even if secretly, retained. The girls in the cloisters were unconscious representatives of the families from which they sprung. But occasionally there were iconoclasts among them. Those were for the most part the most conservative in the retention of national customs, and scorned the pettinesses of outward conformity, but looked beneath the surface of things, if ever so vaguely, and found a deep and dangerous interest in complex questions which they were unfitted to ask, and, more entirely still, to solve. Among these were the problems affecting women and their relations to the new order of domestic life, modern views of which are for the most part utterly contrary to the trend of Mexican thought and life.

Carmen, and others with her, recognised this fact, but, unwilling to await slowly changing conditions, illogically strove to ignore them, and scoffing at the old ideals of womanhood which they had been taught to revere, set up in their place the more or less distorted images of foreign and uncomprehended standards.

The tranquil nuns had little suspicion and no understanding of this revolutionary spirit, and least of all would have charged their brilliant pupil Carmen Valdivia with what would have appeared to them dangerous and heretical opinions. She appeared to them to absorb so completely the lore of the text-books, that she could have no time or desire for other matters, while in fact the lessons of the school-room were so readily assimilated by her that her mind craved excitement, and wandered in a maze of doubts and tormenting aspirations.

Carmen's aunt was one of those keen yet indolent observers for which the female society of the capital is noted, and soon suspected that the mind of her unsophisticated niece was in a state of turbulent perplexity which would conduce little to that perfect passivity in the co-heiress which the interests of Tlaltelzingo demanded. Carmen, who from the frequent letters received from her grandmother was constantly reminded of the almost patriarchal system to which she would soon be recalled, expressed confused and conflicting ideas which Dona Florencia traced to a vague rebellion against the manifest destiny which consigned the young girl to the arms of a man who had awakened in her no thrill of passion. But

to Carmen herself the prospect of her speedy marriage—and her consequent freedom from the limitations imposed upon girlhood—was the only one which brightened the horizon of her future.

She had no conception of the need or capability of her nature for the passion of love. The possibility of moulding her own fate, the development of the higher qualities of her being, seemed a thing to her quite apart from marriage. So accustomed had she been from infancy to look upon Norberto as a necessary adjunct to her future environment, that her thoughts of him caused not a flutter. She was too much absorbed in abstract dreams and theories to speculate upon the effect so familiar a factor as Norberto might have upon her destiny.

‘She speaks of him as if he were an image of wood,’ observed Dona Florencia to her nephew Fernando. ‘She neither blushes nor sighs when she names him. You must take her away from here as soon as she leaves the convent, or she will fall madly in love with the first gallant that casts an eye upon her.’

‘Oh, she has always known it is Norberto she must love,’ returned Fernando carelessly. ‘All the girls of our family have married the men selected for them and settled down as model wives and mothers, and why should not Carmen?’

Dona Florencia shrugged her shoulders. 'Carmen—is Carmen,' she said sententiously. 'Besides, there is now that pernicious doctrine that woman has a right to consult her own will and shape her own fate.'

'She will hardly have been infected with that in a nunnery !' exclaimed Fernando, with a tone of alarm.

'It is a microbe,' laughed Dona Florencia, 'and infects the air, ay, even of the cloisters. There it is, of course, all the more likely to addle brains so unprepared to receive it. Blessed be Mary we are all Liberals, but Don Benito made himself responsible for a vast deal of nonsense and mischief when he broke down the safeguards of the church and caste, and let loose a thousand wild ideas about equality and freedom. But then he was an Indian, and what could he know about conventionalities? Yet how he would have laughed to hear a girl talk about following the dictates of the heart and the leadings of Nature !'

'Don Benito was not a fool !' cried Fernando. 'He never bothered himself about women and their vagaries. Well, I will take Carmen home as soon as a little matter of business I have on my hands is settled. Meanwhile, dear aunt, get Carmen out of that nest of owls and let

her see a little sunshine ; it will clear the cobwebs from her brain.'

Dona Florencia raised her eyebrows. She knew well the nature of Fernando's business, and that it was not likely to make the way clearer to Carmen, but, with that fatuous belief in the right of the male biped to guide his own course which a long ancestral training had rooted in her mind, she made no remark, nor even hinted by a glance that, on his own account, it would be well to hasten his long-delayed return to the hacienda. She determined, however, to give her niece the benefit of all the worldly wisdom she felt herself constrained to withhold from the brother, and entered upon her task of duenna with zeal.

But though, after her removal from school, Carmen on occasions talked in a way that made her relatives anxious, her conduct could not have been, in her aunt's eyes, more irreproachable. There was not a girl in the city who affected more completely the *rôle* of a beauty and an aristocrat. She was coy, retiring, piquant, gay,—one could never count upon her moods—yet all in turn were charming. To the intimates of the family circle her presence was tonic, like wine, and the reputation of her wit drew around her a crowd of admirers who

extolled and exaggerated her beauty until she became the toast of the clubs, while upon every afternoon when she was seen by her aunt's side in the 'paseo,' she was the object of a vast deal of that ocular admiration which the gilded youth of Mexico are wont to bestow on the reigning belle of the season.

When her carriage would stop at the bandstand, drawn up in line with those of her aunt's numerous friends, the fluttering of kisses from other jewelled fingers and coquettish bows from heads bedecked with the most bewildering creations of millinery would fail to attract her admirers from Carmen, who chose to assume a simplicity of attire which in some mysterious way gave a classical elegance to the lines of her face and figure. She impressed one rather as a perfect cameo cut against the lucent background of the soft blues and greens of the sky and herbage than a being of that soft and flower-like type that marks the women of her race.

Yet she was not cold or statuesque, and though her beauty was undeniable, it owed its greatest charm to her grace and vivacity. The originality of her ideas and mode of expressing them held the interest of her friends and called forth their own best wit and badinage.

Her aunt in truth thought her an arrant

coquette, but that, in the lady's mind, was rather a virtue than a fault. She looked on at the ogling and sighing, and listened to light chat where the accents of deeper feeling often penetrated, and thought it all like a pantomime set to soft music. Through it all she saw that Carmen's heart or fancy were untouched. Had she been seeking an alliance for her niece she would have been distinctly dissatisfied; as it was, she was flattered at the triumph of the débutante, and reassured that it left nothing tangible behind it.

'Norberto Sanchez is safe,' she thought; though Carmen avowed that she was looking for a man who was capable of a high or generous thought or action.

'These dolls who talk of honour and bravery know as little about it as Norberto,' she would say, 'but they are sometimes amusing, and help to pass the time. Even the best of them think of nothing but gallantry and gaming at the club.'

'And politics—' began Dona Florencia.

'Politics,' laughed Carmen, with that cynical acuteness that often appeared even in her lightest speeches, 'politics. The cackling "*pollos*" suppose they use their best powers by keeping a happy neutrality in important matters, and in retaining the good graces of Don Porfirio.'

She swept a deep courtesy as she mentioned the name of the President of the Republic.

‘And very right they are,’ returned Dona Florencia. ‘Where should we find another like him? Pity it is,’ she added musingly, ‘that he is an Indian.’

‘*Vaya*, my aunt!’ cried Carmen, ‘are we not all Mexicans? But it is we, who have Castilian blood, who should hide ourselves, or at least not be ashamed of the brown blood—the best blood—in us. The very viceroys were more tolerant than we moderns. My grandmother says it is a new thing to call any Mexican “Indian” as a reproach, and when I think of Guatemotzin and scores of others—of that greatest of all, Benito Jaurez—who gave us a place among nations, and Don Porfirio Diaz, who has maintained it, I say the same.’

She stopped in some confusion, as her aunt laughed. ‘Don Norberto’s ancestry then must please you, if nothing else does,’ she remarked.

It had in truth been a regret to her that the pure Castilian blood of the Valdivias was to be darkened by the aboriginal strain, which was marked in the heir of Santa-Trinita.

Carmen frowned. It annoyed her that every sentiment she expressed should be turned to

the apparent encouragement of the family plans concerning her. It should have been enough, she thought, that she did not oppose them.

It was not long after this that Carmen, wearied of the gallantry of the aristocrats of the Capital, began to manifest a sympathetic curiosity anent the doings and speeches of certain agitators, who proclaimed the dignity of labour and the innate superiority of sense and sensibility : possessed by the hewers of wood and drawers of water ; over that of the task-masters who lorded it over them.

Carmen naturally knew little of the merits of the questions, but she burned to learn more, while Doña Florencia, alarmed, wrote to her mother that, for a young lady destined to become the bride of a hacendado of orthodox ideas, her niece perhaps knew too much already. That her education was much more advanced than even the most liberal member of her family could desire.

There was a subtle suggestion in this epistle that induced the anxious dame to write imperatively to Fernando to return to the hacienda and bring his sister with him.

Fernando was more disconcerted than was Carmen by the suddenness of this recall, and with far more reason. He was enrolled upon

the list of members of the most aristocratic club of the city, where the stakes at cards were fabulously high, and where he had been one of the most daring tempters of fortune. As had happened to his father and uncle before him, the goddess had first favoured and then abandoned him. He had lost some thousands, enough to seriously cripple his resources, and he was reluctant to retreat without making good his losses.

But the struggle was vain, and one night the young man left the club uncertain whether he would not blow out his brains. But the morning brought gentler counsel, and he determined to act the part of the repentant prodigal. After all, he reflected, when the interests of Tlaltelzingo were joined to those of Santa-Trinita, the extra thousands he had lost would matter little. Meanwhile he was without money, and while he waited for remittances, was so domestic in his habits and tastes that he truly charmed his aunt and sister. There was a delay in the arrival of funds that indicated some embarrassment at the hacienda, and the rainy season was therefore well advanced before the returning wanderers found themselves approaching Cruz-Roja.

As the train skirted the well-remembered valley they were somewhat dismayed to see a

fine white mist drifting slowly from the mountain tops, filling the deep ravines ; and rendering almost invisible the distant walls which their eyes eagerly sought. How unreal, how spectral they appeared !

As they had journeyed Carmen had thrilled with the expectant joy of home-coming, but as the train lessened speed, preparatory to stopping to allow of their descent, her eyes filled with tears and her heart beat suffocatingly. She knew not why. Who knows when he is passing into the atmosphere of crucial life ?

When Carmen Valdivia left Cruz-Roja she had worn a bright-coloured if somewhat dingy gown and a flower-trimmed hat, which she had supposed eminently suitable for travelling, for the ethics of dress had been as totally unknown to her as to her grandmother. Now, on her return, she was in the strictest tailor-made garb, and by the plainness of her appearance sadly disappointed the little group of village folk who had gathered to meet her. The men had to look at the lady twice before they were reconciled, and some of the women audibly expressed the hope that the contents of the trunks that were hastily thrown upon the platform were richer and gayer, and altogether more worthy the *Senorita*. The *Senorita* could have re-

assured them on that point. Tlaltelzingo was to see such glories as only London or Paris create.

But though her garb was less brilliant than of yore, the Senorita herself seemed to all eyes to have passed through some process of magical transformation. What a glow was on the cheeks that had been used to keep an ivory paleness! What lustre in the large dark eyes! How the brown hair twined and glistened under the brim of her black hat! How slender and lithe was the figure that sprang unaided down the steps, to be clasped in the embrace of her uncle Don Isidor, and then to turn with a pretty air of coquetry to the young man standing at his side!

It was Don Norberto Sanchez, in the blackest and newest of riding suits, booted and spurred as a cavalier should be. But suddenly the on-lookers became aware that Don Norberto was at a disadvantage, a sudden cloud seemed to have fallen upon him. He was vaguely impressed and irritated by it himself as he bent over the hand extended to him. He was awkward and ill at ease, and Carmen, as she heard his voice and felt his touch, became conscious of a subtle inferiority in his personality which she had never before recognised.

‘She is beautiful! She is fit to be the bride of a prince,’ thought the young man. ‘*Caramba!* She will find I am Prince in Santa-Trinita.’

‘*Vaya!* this is good bread, no doubt,’ reflected Carmen, in the proverbial phraseology her people use so freely, ‘but bread chokes one.’

She had acquired a taste for forbidden cates, though she did not herself know it.

The village folk who crowded the platform—the hale bringing with them their cherished breadwinners, the lame, deformed, and blind beggars—made way for the Senores as they turned towards a group from the hacienda, which was gathered under the trees, a little distance in the rear. The people in the waiting train thought it a pretty sight as they saw all the picturesque elements that indicated the roadside excitement—the beggars forgetting to whine, the vendors to offer their fruits, and the leathern-clad and sandalled porters to work,—while the young lady passed smiling through their midst.

The heavy and cumbrous Spanish carriage (that had seen service for at least half a century), and to which were harnessed four strong mules, was in waiting, and also a cart for the baggage,

but the travellers did not wait to see it laden. It was five o'clock, and the rain was expected every moment. The drivers glanced anxiously up at the clouds, and the horsemen unrolled their *ponchos* from their saddles and threw them over their shoulders. Carmen, her maid, and Don Isidor who, in rainy weather, was gouty, took their seats in the carriage. The packages, of which there were many, for they seem to spring up spontaneously around a Mexican traveller, were piled around them. Carmen kissed her hand to the departing train, which rolled away amid a flutter of white handkerchiefs. The gentlemen mounted their horses, the servants, or *mozos*, formed an irregular escort, the horses snorted with the excitement produced by the coming storm, and, with a jangle of accoutrements and a rattle of wheels, the party dashed rapidly away. To the observers on the train and in the village it appeared to plunge headlong down a precipice, for, by a turn in the cañon, or in the dense mist which grew more impenetrable each moment, men and horses, even the great bulk of the swaying carriage, were instantly lost to view. The villagers crossed themselves.

‘*Valgame Dios!*’ they said, ‘the Senores were mad to leave here to-night. Any roof

would have been better, even that of a dog kennel, than what they are likely to find over them before they reach Tlaltelzingo. Our Lady of Succors be with them !'

CHAPTER III

THE travellers had scarcely left Cruz-Roja in the rear before they, too, commended themselves to their patron saints. Fog and heat rolled up from the valley and enwrapped them in a dull, white film of miasmatic vapours, through which surrounding objects loomed ghostlike.

It had been many years since any of the party had encountered such effects of cloud and terrestrial exhalations, for they prevailed only after long drought and when it was about to be ended by floods. There had been seven successive years of dry weather, during which the nominal rainy season had been passed with scorching days and dewless nights. Crops had failed, the cattle upon the hills had died from lack of water and pasturage, and the beauty of the valley had greatly waned. The hills around stood like brass, and only straggling vines, bearing flaunting, poisonous blossoms, and forming the hiding-places for serpents and savage beasts, had flourished and run rampant. This year, as

upon its predecessors, rain had been anxiously looked for, and its first appearance had been hailed with delight.

It had come in May, anticipating the usual time by nearly a month. Carmen's return had been planned so as to escape any probability of encountering it, and as the drenched days passed while she was still detained in Mexico by Fernando's affairs, her relatives were tormented by the most serious apprehensions for her safety. As for Fernando, he became for the time quite a secondary personage. He had brought fresh complexities into the affairs of the hacienda, and who but Carmen could right them? Yet now her way home was threatened with danger. The railroad was liable to impassable washouts, and, even the road through the valley from Cruz-Roja, to inundations from the streams—often invisible—that crossed it; and which were likely at any hour to become roaring torrents and effectually bar the passage of man or beast.

Till this time, however, the parched earth had absorbed the abundant rains; the watercourses had remained within their bounds, and it had not been doubted that the young travellers could be conducted to their home in safety. But suddenly the indications had changed.

The weather-wise shook their heads and muttered together ominously. The driver urged the panting mules to their utmost, and the escort maintained a steady pace some rods in advance in order to encourage them. The road wound for some distance through a precipitous cañon, in which there was semi-darkness, and which was scattered with rocks and *débris* carried down from the hillsides by the recent rains. A cloud of impenetrable blackness presently seemed to sink downward and arch the walls of the cañon. It was thought possible it might float southward and empty itself below the river ford. But the pressure of the atmosphere became greater and greater ; the cloud filled the cañon ; and this, added to the asperities of the road, made the descent to the valley a veritable torture.

Carmen had soon ceased to ask news of the hacienda, or to attempt to entertain her uncle with the gossip of the Capital.

‘*Valgame Dios !*’ she exclaimed, as the mules tore on at full speed and the lumbering carriage almost dashed against the walls of the cañon, ‘those animals surely have never been in harness before, and Pancho, the driver, has been drinking too much *mescal*. For mercy’s sake, uncle, stop him ! This is unbearable.’

Don Isidor leaned out of the window and looked anxiously upward before he answered. He could catch no glimpse of the sky, but he shouted reassuringly to the driver,—

‘We shall be all right, Pancho, if we can reach the relay-house before the river rises.’

‘It is not raining yet,’ he added to Carmen, but the hiss of the whip and the cries of the men almost made his words inaudible. The mules perceptibly slackened their pace. Carmen could see their black hides, specked with foam, glittering through the mist. Their ears lay flat upon their heads; they trembled as they strained. The figures of the escort, before and behind the carriage, loomed up in giant proportions. It was intensely hot, and a menacing silence was bodily felt.

The maid on the front seat crossed herself, and Carmen did the same; but when the maid began to tell her beads Carmen suddenly laughed. She was becoming wildly excited. Something terrible, but new, strange, vivid encompassed her. Someone rode up to the side of the carriage and looked in upon her, as though her voice had summoned him. It was so dark that she could scarcely discern the man’s face, but with surprise she saw that it was not that of her brother or of Norberto.

There was no other that should have dared to approach her. She drew back, puzzled for an instant, and the lurching of the carriage took her breath, then she cried gaspingly,—

‘Why, uncle, Cosme Rul is here. I thought you had driven him from the hacienda? Did he not nearly kill his stepfather a few months ago? I thought you had forbidden him to go near Tlaltelzingo because he beat the man so cruelly?’

‘So I did,’ answered Don Isidor, who was glad to talk of anything to divert the thoughts of his niece, ‘but it appeared afterwards that the boy was right, and besides, there is not such a *vaquero* to be found. That sly Pedro is beyond doubt a brute who habitually beats his wife and children. He is a robber too. Some say when he was first married he induced the boy to join him. Be that as it may, there appears to be much bad blood between them now. I am glad it is so. It would be dangerous to peaceful men should two such strong fellows be in league against them.’

‘It is strange the boy has such an evil reputation,’ said Carmen.

‘Well, yes,’ assented her uncle, ‘but the fellow is surly with his mates. There is always something suspicious about that, and even the

padre says he has no right to keep his mother from her husband, bad as the man is. However, Cosme Rul is a hard worker, and supports the woman and her family. But she, poor creature, is a fool, and goes about berating her defender, and bemoaning her *buen castigo* as she calls her worthless husband. If the boy were wise he would leave her to her deserts, but it fills him with rage that his mother should be beaten, and he swears he will kill Pedro if he goes near her again.'

'How odd it is,' remarked Carmen, 'that most men love women best who are fools. They even prefer that their own mothers should be without reason.'

She peered out into the fog. The walls of the cañon were still close upon them, though they were near the point where it opened upon the lower level of the valley. The mules plodded on, only for infrequent moments breaking into the gallop to which they were urged by the driver and his *soto*. The air was closer than ever, and the black cloud pressed lower. Suddenly a forked fire like a red-hot bayonet, darted through it, revealing for a moment the lurid sky. A terrific crash reverberated through the cañon. A wind rushed by, bringing with it great scattering

drops of rain. The mist was swept away like a scroll. Electric bolts seemed to hurl themselves from side to side, splitting the rocks, which cracked with echoing detonations, and then followed floods of rain, bringing darkness filled with the roar of thunder.

Men had sprung from their horses and closed the windows of the carriage, then regained their horses, as the alarmed and cowering animals turned their flanks to the storm, and gathered for protection under the lee of the cliffs. The mules, on the contrary, reared in their traces, and strove to turn in the narrow roadway, and the driver and the *soto* had much ado to keep them from dashing themselves, and the carriage, to pieces against the walls of the cañon. As the vehicle reeled and lurched in the terrible glare and confusion of the electric storm, and apparently under the glittering hoofs of the mules, the imprisoned travellers thought their destruction was inevitable. Don Isidor and the maid sank low on the cushions, almost paralysed with dismay, but Carmen experienced an exultant vigour of mind and body, as though she were made part of the elemental forces about her.

At length the storm seemed to expire under torrents of blinding rain, and in the melancholy

darkness Carmen sank in the arms of her reviving uncle, more exhausted by the excitement than the terror of the scene, while the reaction wrung from her agonising sobs, that recalled the old gentleman to a remembrance of his duties as her support and protector. Presently the rain lessened to a steady downpour, the escort resumed their places, and the mules plodded heavily forward.

After plunging for some time through the almost obliterated road of the cañon, they emerged upon the oozing black mud of swamps, tangled with reeds and giant ferns. The valley in its arable portions was largely planted with sugar-cane, and in some places there were enclosures of giant cacti, behind which rose a solitary bamboo hut, roofed with knife-grass; but all were of tiny dimensions, and so filled with drenched and wretched occupants that the travellers could not hope to obtain shelter within them.

A halt was at last imperative. The river was close at hand, and it was decided that it would prove impossible to cross it that night. They had been obliged to abandon the road to the relay-house, and the mules were exhausted and would probably be drowned, should they be forced to attempt the ford.

Carmen, who had regained her calmness, looked disconsolately out upon the group of men, each wrapped to his eyes in his dripping *serape*, with his wide hat pulled over his brows. Their drenched horses panted under them, seemingly ready to sink into the ground. How wretched and helpless seemed both men and beasts, the masters perhaps more so than the servants. From the comparatively dry interior of the carriage, Don Isidor demanded impatiently what was to be done, and the men naturally looked to the young Senores for orders.

Don Norberto feebly proposed that the party should return to Cruz-Roja for the night, though he knew as well as anyone how impossible it would be to retrace the precipitous path. Fernando suggested that an outrider should be sent to look at the river, but it was easy enough to guess its condition from the dull roar that reached their ears, and the overflow that eddied round them in the bogs and swamps.

Through the deep forest upon their left was seen, under shallow water, a narrow *vereda*, or bridle-path, over which boughs hung so low that a horse might scarcely pass beneath them ; but during the conference one of the *mozos* forced his way in, and after a short reconnais-

sance returned, to advise the party to do the same, as there was a hut not far away where both the travellers and their animals might find shelter.

This information was brought by Cosme Rul, and, had the need been less pressing, would have probably been received with misgiving, but as there was not the least hope that the ford could be crossed, no shelter which offered for the night was to be rejected. Don Fernando gave orders at once that the *peon* should lead them into the wood. It was readily apparent that the carriage could not enter, and it was decided to leave it to the care of the driver and his *soto* or helper ; but it was a much more perplexing matter to ascertain how Carmen was to be transported, with even partial shelter from the rain which still fell—with less violence—but with steady persistence.

The young girl scarcely knew how the matter was determined, but in a few moments she found herself wrapped in a man's *serape*, seated on the neck of a horse, and clinging to an arm which, as unyielding as steel, was clasped around her waist. She felt no tremor of timidity, for her childhood's days were not so distant that she had forgotten journeys made on the saddle-bow of some trusted servant. Even had her lover

been her conductor, reserve under the circumstances would have been superfluous, but it was to one of the expert horsemen—a servant—to whom she had been consigned, and she thought with some anger, a singularly rough one. He forced his horse to a mad pace, and made neither stop nor pause, though the path was blocked with fallen trees and stones, and so crowded by thorny bushes that Carmen expected every moment to be pulled to the ground.

But there was no chance of that. The man's grasp did not relax for an instant, and his horse leaped every obstacle, lifted and guided by the sinewy hand that Carmen felt at her side. Presently she felt a wild exultation in her rapid flight and the sense of power which was about her. So might have felt a nymph of old in the clasp of a god. She glanced back. Not a creature was in sight. Then forward to what seemed impenetrable solitude. Then, with a gasp, she descried the dark face of the man who was bearing her away. She had not before known that he was Cosme Rul. He was not looking at her, but forward into the gloom, as though defying any hindrance to the act he had resolved upon.

Her conversation with her uncle flashed upon her mind. Why had they trusted her with this

man? Wild memories of *plajios*, or kidnapping for the sake of ransom, passed through her brain. She knew, too, that such reflections must be tormenting those who had given her from their keeping; but, in reality, their fears were more terrible than she could conceive of.

They had supposed that a *détour* of a few yards would bring them to the hut of which he had spoken, but it proved to lie a mile or more from the main road, and the time which elapsed before it came in view seemed interminable to the anxious Don Isidor, and both Fernando and Norberto were seething with rage when they at last saw Cosme Rul standing calmly in the low doorway of an adobe building, covered with vines, which rendered it barely distinguishable from the surrounding forest. Carmen stood there also, laughing, though evidently relieved from some nervous tension.

The building was too considerable a one to be the home of a mere field labourer or shepherd. The sheds around it were many, and were filled with barley and straw, and, it might be seen, many horses were habitually stabled in them, though not one was there at that time. In the hut itself were a number of rude beds, mere benches of adobe, ranged around the wall and covered with sheepskins. Broken gun

stocks and other implements scattered about indicated that the place was used as a rendezvous rather than as a permanent dwelling-place.

Though glad of the shelter, there was not a man—gentle or simple—but that looked askance at him who had led them to it. Who but a *ladron* would have been able to conduct them so readily and so safely to this robbers' den? For that such it was no one could doubt.

While the horses were being stabled the gentlemen communicated their suspicions to each other in low voices.

Fernando, in an adventurous spirit, exhibited a lively relish of the situation, while Don Norberto counselled an immediate retreat, representing earnestly to Don Isidor the dangers to which Carmen would be exposed should the bandits return to their stronghold.

'Bah! Let them come,' cried Fernando. 'They will find to their cost that their landlord is in possession.' The hut indeed stood upon the lands of Tlaltelzingo, and was one of many of which the owners had no cognisance. 'Let them come. We are not cowards, and our arms are ready.'

'It is strange,' said Don Isidor, 'that in all their searchings the *rurales*—mounted police—

have never come upon this place. Sooner or later they surely must come upon it, and it is to be hoped it won't happen to-night, for they would open fire without as much as a *quien vive*.'

Don Norberto shuddered. 'It would be much safer for us to leave here at once,' he muttered. 'But, Our Lady, how it rains!'

'Cats, dogs and pitchforks,' ejaculated Fernando, cheerfully. 'All the more reason that the Senores' *rurales* will not be abroad to-night, nor the bandits either. We shall be safe enough. Not a chance of an exchange of civilities with any of those gentry.'

'I distrust that fellow,' whispered Norberto, pointing covertly to the door, where Cosme Rul stood, the rain dripping from every point of his leathern suit, which from yellow had turned to a shining brown.

'You are prejudiced,' answered Fernando, shrugging his shoulders. The prejudice really seemed more reasonable to him than most of Norberto's cavillings. The young *peon* was bending slightly forward, peering through the trees over the path he had led them, as a lithe animal peers for its expected prey.

Fernando touched the pistol at his side suggestively, and Don Isidor twisted his moustache

into a fiercer curl. Norberto was about to speak when Carmen sauntered near, and seating herself upon a sheepskin began to unplait her damp hair with a smile of enjoyment. Scarce a trace of wet marred her trim gown. She was glad of that among other things, and laughingly sympathised with Don Norberto as he called her attention to his own somewhat forlorn plight. Her cheerful acceptance of the discomforts of their situation, and her entire unconsciousness of any cause for uneasiness, went far to disabuse the minds of her kinsfolk of their misgivings, and presently the whole party were engaged in an animated discussion as to ways and means of making themselves comfortable for the night.

CHAPTER IV

CARMEN and her maid had already satisfied themselves, by a hasty inspection, that nothing in the way of food was to be found in the hut. There was, it is true, in a corner a measure of corn, but neither a *metate* for grinding nor a *comal* for baking was to be seen. Evidently men—and men alone—had occupied the place; for to a peasant woman those articles are indispensable. The maid complained bitterly to Carmen of the lack of them—as though she was responsible—and Carmen commented, with a sort of pity, upon the privations their unknown hosts must have endured in their uncared-for abode. To be without means of making *tortillas* represented to the minds of both women famine and the extreme of misery. It was, indeed, under the circumstances, a matter of supreme importance, for the supper hour was approaching, and the prospect of passing the long night without food was not an inviting one.

After a hasty consultation it was decided to

send foragers back to the miserable huts they had passed in the valley in search of provisions, however coarse they might prove. Don Norberto bewailed the necessity of lessening their numbers, and suggested that at least the most reliable men should be retained at hand. Fernando, in some impatience, and also judging that Cosme Rul must know the country and its resources better than any other man in the party, ordered him with an associate, to mount their horses, which still stood saddled before the door, and depart instantly upon the errand.

In Mexico the old patriarchal relations between master and man still exist, particularly in the rural districts. The superior commands what he will, and the inferior unquestioningly obeys. What, then, was the indignation and surprise of Don Fernando, and of all present, when, after a moment's pause, the young *peon* said surlily,—

‘I brought you here, Senor, and whoever else may go I shall stay. Send some other man to seek food.’

The young hacendado stood speechless with rage. Don Isidor turned threateningly, but before he could utter a word Norberto Sanchez, whose whip was in his hand, drew it sharply across the face of the *peon*, crying loudly,—

‘*Insolentie!* If you were my servant you should choose your words better. Go, rascal! and mind that you bring the best the country affords. I warrant you know where to find it.’

His voice shook with apprehension as he ended. He had forgotten, when he had yielded to the impulse of anger, that he was not dealing with one of his own cowed *peones*. He threw some money at the rebellious servant and turned away with a grand air, which impressed Don Isidor mightily. He was glad that Carmen should see her suitor at such advantage, and regretted that Fernando had not as readily found terms so much to the purpose. He expected to see the *peon* mount at once and ride away abashed; but the young fellow instead threw after Norberto a glance of restrained and concentrated bitterness, but with no contempt, such as flashed from the eyes of Carmen.

A servant picked up the money and, with others, went in search of food. Cosme Rul stoically led away his horse to the sheds, and when he reappeared resumed his station under the little brush-covered arch of the doorway. It no longer rained, but the forest was bowed down with the weight of the water; that shone and rippled over the matted verdure. Upon the left the swollen and turbid river swept

foaming by. Trees torn up by the roots, and all sorts of *débris*, were whirled rapidly on. Dead animals, washed from their pastures, circled past in helpless gyrations, and over all the setting sun threw a red and spectral glare.

Cosme Rul had the stoical aspect, and the veiled yet keen eyes of the true *ranchero*. He looked upon the destruction wrought by the storm as though it did not concern or affect him in the slightest degree. Perhaps it did not ; he was thinking of something far different. He did not utter even an exclamation, or move, when he saw a heavy body thrown violently upon the low bank. If it were that of an animal—well. If that of a man—well. If dead, the creature would lie there without suffering. If only stunned, would probably revive.

What followed proved the exactness of his reasoning. The body was that of a man ; who for some moments lay motionless. Then an arm was thrown upward spasmodically, and soon the other, and the drenched wretch rolled over. A strangling moan reached the ear of the observer. By this time he had begun to be interested. No other person had seen or heard anything ; all within the hut were occupied, and the men in the sheds were rubbing down the horses.

Cosme Rul stepped a few paces nearer the river. The man it had cast out was a strong one, who, rising to his feet, staggered a moment ; shook himself, and walked gropingly in the direction of the hut.

‘ Maledictions ! ’ he muttered as he advanced. ‘ I should have tried the ford further down, and kept to the mule too. That shows what one gains by soft-heartedness. Now I have lost the best mule I possessed, to say nothing of the other creature.’

Cosme heard his words and smiled grimly. It was evident this man’s presence was not unexpected by him, though the manner of his coming was. He had not been looked for from the river but from the forest.

‘ I am always in ill luck,’ continued the newcomer, in the tone of a man with a continual grievance. ‘ *Caramba !* I would not have lost that mule for a fortune. It was my cursed obstinacy that brought it about ; and then my soft heart. I should have ridden her across myself. Was I not nearly drowned ? and nothing gained by it after all.’ He stopped and burst into a derisive laugh, and as he did so threw up his head.

The laugh penetrated into the interior of the hut. Someone glanced out and called

the attention of the rest to what was passing. They could see the two men dimly, but could hear nothing that was said ; neither did they detect the expression of dismay that leapt into the eyes of the new comer and quenched his merriment. He too was a *ranchero* like Cosme, and usually wore a mien as stolid, but it was some moments before his face resumed its wonted mask. Meanwhile, his hand crept back to the pistol on his hip.

‘Pshaw!’ said Cosme, coolly, ‘the powder is wet.’ But he kept his eye on the weapon. As a club it might still be made effective.

‘Have I not warned you,’ he continued, ‘to keep on this side of the river? You swore you would put not only that, but the railroad between us ; yet here you are in your old haunt, and you have come from the grounds I warned you from.’

‘No, no!’ ejaculated the man, too eagerly to inspire belief. ‘Listen, *hijo mio*.’

‘I will listen to nothing,’ interrupted Cosme. ‘You are as false as the devil, and as cruel as hell. I have the right to kill you for breaking your word to me ; and, by the holy saints, I will do so if I find you have been at Tlaltelzingo, or near it.’

‘Son of my heart, you are too choleric,’

answered the man, coolly, though the veins of his neck swelled as though he was putting great restraint upon himself, 'too choleric. That reconciles me to the thought that we are not friends. Our lives are valuable, so it is perhaps well that we spend them apart, else one might be cut short. Keep to your side of the river, *amigo*, as closely as I do to mine and all will be well. My best mule was grazing in the meadow a mile above here—on this side the river, mark you—I went to save her; but the waters rose so rapidly, as you know, that she was swept into the river before I reached her, and in trying to get her out I came near losing my own life.'

'You are lying,' retorted Cosme, with calm exasperation; 'but if the matter that you went upon concerns me, I shall find it out. Meanwhile, go, find a lodging elsewhere.'

'The hut is mine,' began the ousted host, but Cosme stopped him by a significant gesture.

'Dogs are kicked out when their masters need room,' he said. 'Don Fernando is there'.

'Don Fernando!' echoed the other, with raised brows. 'Ah, then, you have shown him what a palace he owns hidden in these woods!' 'You have done me a service,

Cosme *mio*,' he added, with a malignant glance, 'that I am not likely to forget.'

'My memory, too, is good,' retorted the young man, as the elder, with a gesture of mock courtesy—that seemed genuine to the onlookers—began to move away. 'As he turned through the wood Cosme watched him as a dog watches an animal he is commanded not to attack but which he longs to throttle.

'Good-bye till our next meeting,' said the departing man with a laugh. 'Then, may my powder be dry.' He was several paces away in the depths of the wood, and he raised his voice as he looked back with a leer and added, 'My humble regards to your *Senora-Madre* when you next see her.'

Cosme rushed forward, drawing the long knife from his belt, but his tormentor knew the ground better than he did, and at once disappeared.

'*Santo Nino!* I wish I had killed him,' muttered the young man as he returned to his post at the door of the hut. He had received the greatest insult that one *ranchero* can offer another. His mother had been mockingly spoken of by his enemy, and the fact that the enemy was her own husband made the insult sting the deeper.

During the progress of this interview, which had been closely watched, few words had been spoken within the hut. 'The man is Pedro Ortiz,' said Fernando. 'How came he here?' for no one had witnessed the scene at the river.

'Without doubt we have been brought into a trap,' ejaculated Norberto; 'there are perhaps scores of bandits hidden in the sheds.'

Carmen glanced at him impatiently. 'Do you not see he and his stepson are enemies?' she asked, 'and the man is alone, or he would not take Cosme's presence here so coolly.'

'It is ours he respects,' said Don Isidor. 'Naturally the fellow would not enter when we are here. It is not clear to me, however, whether they are friends or enemies; it is suspicious, to say the least, that they should meet here.'

'*Caramba*, they are hand in glove!' cried Don Norberto. 'The gallantry of the young *ladron* outran his discretion; Pedro is denouncing him for it.'

'It is to be hoped that same gallantry will prevent the hidden desperadoes from murdering us,' said Carmen, with mock seriousness.

‘*Santa Virgin!* how you speak!’ exclaimed Don Isidor, while Don Norberto turned pale.

‘Pshaw!’ said Fernando, ‘we Valdivias are safe on our own lands, even in a robbers’ den; but Pedro knows this rendezvous will be broken up, and, of course, is vexed about it. But there is one thing we may agree upon, both the young man and the old one are *ladrones*, and the sooner we get out of their hands the better.’

Carmen shrugged her shoulders, Fernando walked about with an air of annoyance, and Don Isidor and Norberto conversed together in low tones, casting furtive glances at Cosme Rul the while. Presently the maidservant caused a diversion by exclaiming that she had found some chocolate, and, directed by Carmen, proceeded to make a fire of charcoal in a broken *brasero*. Some water was procured, and by the time the chocolate was made the foragers had returned, bringing bread to eat with it.

Carmen declared the rude fare delicious, and her uncle and Fernando ate with good appetites, but Norberto was like a spoilt child. He thought Carmen’s courageous acceptance of the circumstances of the time a selfish triumph of her own strength over his nervous and irascible nature, and found her gaiety an offence. Never-

theless the meal restored a certain amount of cheerfulness to all the men.

By the time it was over the sudden darkness of the semi-tropical night had fallen. There was no light in the hut except that given by a smoky torch, and the atmosphere was hot and oppressive. Carmen could not endure it, and she presently went to sit in the doorway and look at the stars, but they were often hid by drifting clouds, and their watery gleams seemed to invoke her own tears. She furtively wiped them away, ashamed of her weakness.

How strange, how peaceful it was there in the deep woods ! Though she was in a robber's den how safe she felt. It seemed incredible to her that her uncle and Fernando were nervous ; and looked carefully to their weapons, while Norberto complained because they allowed the servants to retire to the sheds with the horses. Here, here away from the world, in solitude and darkness, there was rest and safety and peace. But what of the future ? What was awaiting her at Tlaltelzingo, the home to which she was returning ?

The young girl had never been given to sentiment, neither had her speculations upon life given her any disposition to rebel against what she conceived to be her manifest destiny,

yet upon this night the thought of marriage with Norberto Sanchez presented itself to her in a new aspect. She regarded herself with a sort of disdainful pity, as one who was to be offered an involuntary sacrifice for sins she could not condone. The remembrance of her father for the first time troubled her. She trembled as she thought of the burden he had left for her to lift. Yet Tlaltelzingo was near, and the spell of the old *régime* was upon her. She sighed deeply, yet she did not dream of escape. But oh! if the night would never end, if she might sit there for ever, watching the silent sentinel that paced the narrow path that circled the lonely hut.

But when they came to bid her enter it was at that sentinel her uncle and Norberto cast their darkest looks. Yet, spite of themselves, their fatigue forced them to trust to him, for no sooner did they stretch themselves on the sheepskins that were laid on the sleeping benches for their accommodation than they fell into profound slumber; but Carmen, though the softest skins were reserved for her, could not sleep. She was excited in mind and weary in body, and could not compose herself, and for hours listened feverishly to the tread of the sentinel. He—Cosme Rul—neither broke

bread nor slept, but, with a sabre in his hand, appeared and disappeared in the dim light before the open door ; until the daylight broke. Then he roused the sleepers, though they were loath to rise, and in the pale dawn the party mounted, and prepared to return to the main road and re-commence their journey.

A horse was brought for Carmen, and Don Norberto went gallantly to her side. Fernando was about to follow, when he saw Cosme Rul emerge from the hut with two flaming torches in his hands. One he thrust under the eaves, where they overhung the door and were driest, and the other he flung high upon the knife-grass roof.

Even if he has it in his own mind to destroy it, a man does not take patiently the burning of his property without his leave. Fernando had already determined that the hut should be razed to the ground, yet he swore roundly at the man who had anticipated his orders. Cosme looked up confusedly, like one roused from a dream.

‘*Por Dios*, I forgot you are the master !’ he exclaimed. ‘I forgot all but that the birds would return.’

With the repentant air of a child, he humbly kissed the hand that Fernando had wrathfully extended.

The act made his excuse more readily than his words. Fernando laughed. 'That nest is gone at least. How many more do you know of?'

'That's the question,' remarked Norberto; 'that fellow plays the innocent a little too vigorously. If he is not shot for a robber, he will be for a fool, yet.'

They went out of the forest in the early dawn, with the sinister glare from the burning house lighting them on their way. It shone still on the river when they reached it. The carriage stood upon the marge of yellow sands, which were almost dry as Carmen crossed them. But though the waters had so swiftly subsided, there was still some doubt whether they were low enough to allow the heavy vehicle to pass through in safety.

Several of the *mozos*, Cosme among them, urged their horses into the river, and finding the ford practicable, were about to emerge, when, having turned towards the shore where the party waited, they caught sight of a woman's body floating among the low bushes. Cosme, who the night before had viewed with apathy the struggle of a man for life, turned deadly white and faint. At sight of the floating hair, and poor drenched garments

he uttered a groaning cry. From horror he could not put out a hand to touch the corpse, but a man who lived his neighbour, with an exclamation of dismay, drew it in. All the assembled people looked upon it, and all—even Carmen—recognised the poor bruised face and sodden limbs. They were those of Cosme's mother.

‘The poor fool was drowned in attempting to follow her *ladron* husband,’ said Don Norberto, roughly voicing the general opinion.

‘Without doubt the villain took advantage of the son's absence to wile her away,’ added Don Isidor, with pity in his tones. Carmen wept bitterly, and Fernando spoke in low tones to the bereaved son. The young man shook his head. He had clasped the corpse in his arms. The clinging garments and streaming hair wound round him as he stood on the brink of the river. As the beams of the rising sun fell over him, he looked an incarnation of grief, holding up to the avenging gods the embodiment of all his wrongs.

CHAPTER V

AFTER the passage of the river was effected the remainder of the journey to Tlaltelzingo was made with comparative ease, though the road was washed into rough accumulations of sand and stones. It lay among the foothills for a considerable distance, but turned sharply up a steep ascent as the travellers neared the walls of the great house of the hacienda. The morning was brilliantly clear, and, as is usual in such altitudes, the water that had fallen upon the previous day had been absorbed, or had flowed so rapidly through the deep courses of the river that it was already entering the ocean many leagues away. Little remained to lessen the barrenness of the mountains, and the only traces of it to be seen was the glitter of pools in rocky basins and the fresh green of the trees in the valley.

Upon the hillsides were masses of golden flowers, recovering, under the beams of the morning sun, from the devastating force of the

winds that had prostrated them upon the previous day. Higher still, invading the very haunts of the cactus, waved the rosy blooms of the cosmos. They glorified that day the base of the great, hoary and rugged mountain which forms a background to the groves and vineyards of Tlaltelzingo, among which rise the dun walls of the buildings. White as they look from a distance, they are so no longer as one draws near, but have marvellous shadings of pearl and grey ; with soft tints of rose and azure, as passing clouds and flickering lights and shadows affect them.

From the great mass of masonry, the square towers of the church, the flat embattlemented roofs of the living houses, and the reddish brown tiles of the granaries appear, and the carvings over the great arched doorway and upon the balconies that front the long windows become distinct. Around the northern and western walls of the enclosed stronghold gather the homes of the workpeople—huts of adobe and *jacales* of cane that one scarcely catches a glimpse of until one enters the shadow of the nopales and bamboo beneath which they nestle. Within the walls the tall trees of a terraced garden rise imposingly, cutting off the view in great measure from the windows of the private

rooms used by the family, and ensuring that seclusion which, even in the wide solitude of the country, the aristocratic Mexican affects.

As Carmen approached her home the sunlight flooded the wide front, and the windows of the upper storey glittered like diamonds before her eyes. The hacienda buildings stand at the highest point of the cultivated lands, and the wide fields and groves terrace the ascent and spread like a panorama before them. She realised as she never had done before the beauty and richness of the scene. Don Norberto Sanchez rode beside the carriage and pointed out with subtle magnanimity the superiority of Tlaltelzingo over Santa-Trinita. The pride of family swelled in her bosom ; the Valdivias had ever been the lords of Tlaltelzingo, and theirs it must remain.

Yet this was but a passing thought ; the remembrance of the tragedy at the river rose between her eyes and the actual scene they looked upon. Her tears rose from time to time unbidden. Norberto once detected them, and guessing their cause with repressed scorn, but thinking that they well became her beauty, he whispered sympathy that made her smile with a kindness that brought them nearer the goal their friends had planned for them than the

most elaborate plotting had been successful in doing.

Humble as she had been in life, the death of Juana Ortiz made the subject of conversation of that morning's journey. Carmen had known the woman all her life as an irresponsible creature—a favourite from her very helplessness and special aptitude for falling into pitfalls of circumstance, wherein one must perforce help and pity ; just as some children fall into brooks or fires that offer no dangers to others possessed of only the same amount of sight and strength but with wit to use them.

Juana had seemed to be fulfilling a worthy destiny, while her first husband lived, by keeping his little house and merrily bringing into the world a tribe of children. She played with them while they lived, and if one died, after shedding a few tears she thanked God that she had another *angelito* in the sky. When she became a widow she was for a time the special *protégée* of the Senora Rodriguez, whose patronage she forfeited by marrying Pedro Ortiz. He had come from a distant hacienda, bringing a doubtful reputation with him, and instead of taking his wife to his own *tierra*, as it was thought an honest man would do, he had made his abode at Tlaltelzingo, and his living—no one knew where, or how.

At length it was suspected that his frequent absences were connected with the highway robberies which often took place in the foothills and along the river banks. This suspicion might have given him a certain prestige among his neighbours, but Pedro was quarrelsome in his cups, and beat his wife savagely when she remonstrated. This too might have been looked upon as a mere domestic detail, but when Pedro interrupted more than one Sunday cock-fight, with a fierceness which ended in blood, he became as unpopular with the *rancheros* as with his family. In truth, while he had walked humbly, as a suspected *ladron* should, there had been many who had thought it unreasonable when Cosme interfered to save his mother from a beating. 'A man's conjugal rights,' they said, 'must be upheld, even if he is a trifle too ready with his fist or cane.'

But this did not come about until Cosme was nearly a man. It had long been conceded that it was impertinent to peer too closely into the man's private affairs, especially if they savoured of blood, and dangerous also ; and it was assumed that Cosme, in spite of his seeming antipathy to his step-father, was implicated in his irregular courses. They had been close friends, and much together, when his mother was first

married, and the first open disagreement between them had occurred when Luz, Cosme's eldest sister—a bright, thoughtless creature, like her mother—was wiled away by one of Pedro's friends. Thereafter the wife had fallen into a tearful misery that vented itself in constant whines of grief and discontent, and though she showed a dog-like fidelity to her husband, her fear of him threatened her sanity. When he struck her she uttered shrieks that roused the hacienda and maddened Cosme with rage. Upon one such time he at length fell upon the tyrant and came near ending his tyranny and life together.

After that Pedro was seen at the hacienda only at rare intervals, when he would crow and strut in defiance of Cosme, who toiled incessantly to support the family. The lad grew to be an expert horseman, and sometimes after these visits he would disappear, ostensibly in search of his tormentor, and would return haggard and spent. It had chanced on more than one of those occasions that outrages of unusual atrocity had been perpetrated on the hills beyond Cruz-Roja, and it was believed that the visit of Pedro had been a preconcerted signal for Cosme to join the forces of the brigands, and that the apparent enmity be-

tween the two was a mere blind as to their real relations.

This was an old story to Carmen. She had followed the course of this humble history with that hardness of youth which finds excitement, more or less pleasurable, in every episode of life, without reference to the degree of pain or pleasure it may occasion those most closely interested. To the immature the drama is all; the actors mere puppets. It is only when one is old enough to go behind the scenes, or take part in the play, that the brain and heart which direct it are taken into account. Hitherto the affairs of the family of Ortiz had been a subject for passing vexation or amusement, but when Carmen Valdivia entered the gates of Tlaltelzingo that day, and saw the bereaved children, unconscious of their loss, gathered with the other idlers of the hacienda to welcome her, it was as though she had been behind the scenes and learned the secret springs of tragedy.

The people, who filled the *patio*, crowded round her, welcoming her with childish expressions of joy—or so they seemed to her in the painful earnestness of her feelings. She could not answer them, and appeared cold and impatient as she glanced at Selsa Ortiz, the elder

sister of Cosme, intending to keep her at her side until she should find an opportunity to break to her the news of her mother's death. But the girl, unused to such condescension, did not comprehend the gesture of the young lady, but looked anxiously at the men as they rode into the courtyard, and eagerly questioned the last to come as to the reason that her brother was not with them. The man hesitated a moment, and then bending from his saddle curtly told her what had occurred.

It seemed that every woman in the place heard the words at the same time, or saw the speaker's dramatic gestures, for a general wailing filled the court, accentuated by the piercing cries of Selsa and the children. In the midst of which, with scared and pallid face, the Senora Rodriguez came down the broad staircase, demanding the cause of the tumult.

Carmen clasped her grandmother in her arms and hurriedly gave an account of the scene at the river. The lady was not insensible to the pathos of the occurrence, yet she turned angrily to the people around her, and cried,—

‘ *Dios de mi alma !* Do you not know it is the worst omen in the world to meet returning travellers with tears ? ’

‘ But it cannot be helped,’ interposed Car-

men ; but her grandmother would not listen.

‘I would not have had it happen for a fortune,’ she said. ‘Oh, that silly Juana, to bring such misery upon us!’

‘Upon her children, you mean,’ said Carmen, perplexed ; but her grandmother would not allow her to remain in doubt of her meaning.

‘Confusion and grief have met you at your doors,’ she returned, ‘and they will work you an ill turn, unless the Holy Virgin prevents!’ and she crossed herself rapidly. ‘*Ay de mi* Isidor, did I not tell you that you were doing ill to take Cosme Rul from the hacienda? He always feared Pedro Ortiz would persuade or force his mother to her undoing, and now you see he was right.’

‘But you know I had no choice,’ answered Don Isidor. ‘Norberto’s *mozo* fell ill, and could not follow him, and there was no one to take his place but Cosme.’

Carmen, quite unjustly, added one more to the list of Norberto’s unconscious offences. ‘Why did he not send to Santa-Trinita for another man?’ she mentally questioned, though she might readily suppose there had not been time to do so. That a cavalier could ride

without his *mozo* to follow him was so contrary to custom that it did not for a moment occur to her as possible.

Meanwhile, amid her tears, Selsa was explaining why her mother had left the hacienda. Pedro had come with a tale of having met Cosme on the road to Cruz-Roja, and said they had forgiven old grudges and become the best of friends. He was so loving and kind, and told how lonely and sad he was in his hut, without wife or daughter to cheer him, that Juana cried, and when he begged her to go with him, cried harder than ever, and would not say 'Yes!' or 'No!'

'Fool!' said Don Norberto, uncompromisingly, and there was a general murmur of assent, at which Carmen's eyes glistened with anger. 'Could they not see the poor weak woman had loved this man?'

'She was afraid of Pedro too,' continued the girl. 'She dared not refuse him, and when he told her to follow, she went out of the door, pulling herself away from us as though his lasso dragged her on. She wanted to take the baby in her arms, but Pedro would not let her. He said it would be in her way, or that the rain might come, or that it might be drowned when they crossed the river. And it was my poor

mother that was drowned, and the little one is laughing, not caring at all. *Ay Dios ! Ay Dios mio !* Oh, if my poor Cosme would come !’

‘Take the baby home ; your brother will soon come,’ said Carmen, gently, and she smiled so sweetly on Norberto, when he gave an alms to the mourner, that as he led her up the stairway he ventured to whisper an endearing term that set her cheeks aflame, and which, somewhat to her own astonishment, certainly did not displease her.

‘At least he has a kind heart,’ she thought, yet she was glad when he set out for Santa-Trinita that same morning, after explaining to the Senora Rodriguez that nothing was more distasteful to him than to hear the noisy mourning of the *plebe*, like seeds in a dry gourd, all sound and emptiness.

But he might have stayed without danger to his sensibilities. Cosme Rul did not come home, nor was the body of Juana brought to Tlaltelzingo for burial. That afternoon it rained heavily, but in the morning Padre Nicanor said a mass for the woman’s soul, and ordered a grave to be opened to receive her body, then, after long waiting, was scandalised to learn that the son himself had buried her beside the river, in unconsecrated ground, accepting

help from no one. Afterwards, without a word, he had turned away, and following the course of the cruel river, had disappeared from the few folk, who, repulsed by his unfriendly silence, had withdrawn to some short distance to watch him.

There was a general opinion at first that grief had unsettled the young man's wits. But as time went on, and nothing was seen or heard of him, it was supposed that his absence had been deliberately planned, and that he had joined the bandits, whose depredations beyond the valley became every day more daring. It was even rumoured that he had been seen in company with Pedro Ortiz, and was his secret ally, for people of violent prejudices and few ideas are apt to assume the improbable. Meanwhile, the family he was expected to provide for, and that had hitherto been his charge, formed a miserable-looking group as they stood or crouched dejectedly in the doorway of their hut. Most of them waited patiently for their mother to return, for they were too young to realise her death, and all querulously wondered why Cosme did not come.

CHAPTER VI

THUS a week or more passed, and gradually the tragic incident lost much of its interest as other matters claimed the thoughts of the little community. Perhaps it remained longer in the thoughts of Carmen than if she had been able at once to fall into the old routine of hacienda life, but the petty occurrences of country life seemed tame and colourless after the changing panorama of the city. Yet the people—her own family and the peasants—afforded her food for reflection that she had never known in former days. Those endless problems that the wider world had offered to her mystification and surprise seemed more complex still in those narrow bounds, where her personality was of such importance. She dimly felt she might well be held accountable for the solution of many difficulties and the unravelling of many tangled threads.

She was graver than before she went away,

and, though more beautiful, the peasants had an uneasy feeling that she was less kind.

‘It is because she thinks to marry Don Norberto,’ said one, ‘and would suit herself to his humour ; but that is a pity, for there is but little mercy now at Santa-Trinita.’

‘It is only that she has grown older and wiser,’ said her old nurse. ‘The *niña* will not change for any man, and she needs not when she had a whole city-full to pick and choose from.’

‘Perhaps she is sad for some handsome Senor,’ remarked Selsa Rul, in a sentimental tone. ‘She scolded me to-day for breaking my *olla*. One is always cross when one is sad.’

The girl did not explain that the *olla* had been full of milk that Carmen had coaxed from the dairy-woman for the children’s breakfast, but her allusion to sadness was taken to explain some shortcoming of her own in regard to her charges.

‘They are the Virgin’s foster-children, those orphans,’ answered one of the women, warningly.

‘Yet the *niña* made me wash the face of little Pedrito,’ muttered the girl, as though that had been a covert cruelty both to her and the child.

Fortunately for the present comfort of Carmen, her relatives were more favourably impressed with her demeanour than were the peasants.

Don Isidor thought her so beautiful that her little unorthodox opinions and speeches were charming rather than to be excused. 'Let her say what she will, she must always please,' he cried proudly.

The Senora shook her head. 'It is well she came home; she has had too much freedom,' she said. 'Yet she will settle down, with no harm done. She has the sense for both,' she added, scowling at Fernando, who was under the shadow of her displeasure. His recent escapades had been investigated, and he had an uneasy consciousness that Carmen's freedom, and her applauded good sense, would tend to make her less tolerant of his follies than his grandmother, with her antiquated notions of the privileges of his sex, had proved herself.

'She has been spoiled by admiration,' muttered Fernando, 'and is full of silly ideas—advanced, she would say. You had better have a care that they do not interfere with the well-being of Tlaltelzingo. Sanchez seems greatly in awe of her.'

'Then all is well,' commented the Senora,

with great satisfaction. 'If he fears her sharp speeches, it is that he longs for her smiles.'

'Even so, she may perversely refuse to marry him.'

'The women of Tlaltelzingo are loyal,' replied the Senora, sententiously; 'and, besides, there is not in the country a handsomer man than Don Norberto.'

In truth, that Carmen should hesitate for a moment in her decision did not seriously occur to any one of her family; but as the days passed, and Don Norberto made no sign of his existence, a feverish anxiety seized them. 'What if some rival heiress had caught his fluttering affections?'

'It cannot be,' said Don Isidor; 'there is not such a beauty as our Carmen in all the district; besides, the prosperity of the family depends on this marriage.'

That Providence would recklessly suffer the dignity of the Valdivias to be imperilled was beyond his belief.

Yet there was a general sigh of relief from the Senores, and glances of interest from the peasants, when at noon, one beautiful day, a gorgeously-attired outrider appeared at Tlaltelzingo, and was presently followed by a carriage and four, with an escort of armed men. The

carriage dashed through the wide-open gates, and the driver drew up his steeds with a flourish of whip and rattling of hoof such as had not been heard in the *patio* for many a day. An elegantly-attired gentleman, more overcome by his unwonted importance than by his infirmities, many and constant though they were, descended. His spotless broadcloth, his silk hat with old-fashioned curling brim, his immaculate linen and small, shining boots, and the white gloves upon his hands, proclaimed him the envoy of Love. It was instantly surmised that he had come to ask the hand of Carmen in marriage for his godson, Don Norberto Sanchez y Berganza.

This Don Ranulfo, as he was called, was, in his own proper character as an impoverished member of the local aristocracy, in the habit of visiting Tlaltelzingo quite informally, and usually made his appearance mounted upon a sure-footed but sorry-looking mule, and dressed in a shabby riding suit, covered with tarnished silver embroidery that had been brilliant when the rider was a gay young cavalier. He was usually attended by a servant as antiquated as himself, but on this occasion both mule and servant were discarded. Upon ordinary visits, Don Ranulfo was tardily announced by some urchin sent by the porter at the gate, but now his many names

were proclaimed in full, and Don Isidor and Fernando greeted him at the foot of the broad staircase, and with many ceremonious bows and speeches ushered him to the *sala*, where the Senora awaited him in the hastily-donned glories of her black velvet gown and diamonds, which were usually reserved for attendance at Mass on special feasts and saints' days.

When the carriage and cavalcade had dashed into the courtyard, and Carmen, who was upon the upper corridor, saw the ancient beau descend, she knew at once what his errand must be, and her heart beat with something more like fright than she was accustomed to feel. She was glad that, for the time being, her part was to retire to her own apartment, and she did so hurriedly, laughing nervously as she saw the formal ceremony with which the gentlemen and her grandmother prepared to receive the ambassador, who, as Don Ranulfo, had been treated by all the family with kindly nonchalance.

After some time had elapsed she was sent for, and upon her entrance to the audience chamber—for so it seemed worthy to be called, so stately and grave were the proceedings within it—Carmen was informed by her grandmother of the honour proffered her. Don Norberto Sanchez y Berganza, charmed by her loveliness

and amiable qualities, had sent his friend and kinsman to lay his heart and hand at her feet.

Not a word of the past, of debt, or obligation. Carmen for the moment could have believed herself the object of purely disinterested affection ; but her grandmother bent upon her a severe and urgent glance, and Fernando shifted his eyes nervously as her own sought his. Don Isidor, in pompous tones, took up the tale, and informed her that the family had approved these overtures, and gave their full consent to her acceptance of them, as it was well known that a man of more exalted character than Don Norberto was not to be found, nor one more likely to ensure the happiness of the most fastidious lady.

Carmen stood silent, paler than her wont, yet with a sense of a certain humour in the situation that brought a smile to her lips, and encouraged Don Ranulfo to descant, in a squeaky, high-pitched voice, upon her many charms, which (in the name of Don Norberto) he proclaimed as being far too great for him to foster a hope that she would bestow them on one so humble, yet so adoring. He added, however (on his own part), that this might be true, indeed, if his client were just in the disparagement of his own merits, but that, as she must well know,

Don Norberto was the flower of chivalry and paragon of manly virtues, and that it was only before such incomparable excellence as her own that his could be for an instant decried.

Here Carmen, who had listened with exemplary attention, interposed with a reply that might be expected from a modest young lady, and which her grandmother felt did great credit to her training.

‘Don Norberto does me much honour,’ she said, with a deep curtsey, to the envoy, ‘but I fear I am no match for perfection.’

Fernando looked at her sharply, detecting the sarcasm that escaped the slower minds of their elders. ‘Give Don Ranulfo your answer,’ he said brusquely—‘Yes or No—and leave scruples to be settled between yourself and Norberto.’

But this Carmen would not do. The ungraciousness of her brother at such a time made her not unwilling to lengthen his time of doubt and anxiety, and to take advantage of the conventional usage of hesitancy with which girls in her station, whatever may be their secret predilection, treat a proposal of marriage. Don Isidor and her grandmother thought she accorded all that could be expected of her when she parted from Don Ranulfo with the under-

standing that Don Norberto might, as best he could, strive to gain the promise from her own lips which she was not then ready to send by those of another, and she herself, as well as her family, felt in doing this that she had virtually pledged herself to the long-desired alliance.

Don Ranulfo was entertained at a luxurious breakfast, after which he departed well satisfied with the progress of his mission. Carmen would have hastened to her chamber, for vexatious tears seemed to flood her heart and be ready to flow from her proud eyes, but the Senora embraced her with effusive congratulations, and Fernando observed that under the circumstances she might have dispensed with the customary affectation of hesitation.

‘But it was no affectation,’ cried Carmen. ‘I have not the least desire to marry Norberto Sanchez.’

‘Not desire to marry Norberto Sanchez!’ exclaimed the Senora. ‘Such folly is unheard of. Think—’

‘Yes, I have thought,’ interrupted Carmen, ‘and if you would have me marry him I must think no more, I—’

‘Folly!’ ejaculated Fernando. ‘If not Norberto, who then would you marry?’

‘Your next creditor,’ cried Carmen, with a

mirthless laugh. 'Oh, believe me, I am not insensible of a sister's duty.'

Fernando turned away with a flush upon his cheek. 'No one forces you—can force you to marry against your will,' he muttered surlily.

'Leave me to my own time,' retorted Carmen. 'Yes, grandmamma, as you say, Norberto is perhaps better than any other man in the world. He is at least no worse than those I met in the city. All appear to have their hardnesses and their meannesses—'

'Their meannesses!' cried the Senora, aghast.

'Yes,' retorted Carmen, with a cynical laugh, 'have we not all got them? I who hesitate—Fernando who would have me dare an undesired future that the debts of Tlaltelzingo may be wiped out. You, grandmamma, and my Uncle Isidor, who feign to believe that Norberto is good and noble when you know—'

'Stop!' commanded the Senora, pale with anger. 'Men are men and we must not expect them to be angels.'

Fernando and Don Isidor retreated hastily. They felt the women were on ground it would be safer for them to withdraw from.

'Oh, angels, no,' answered Carmen, who had intended only to comment upon the little claim

that the character of Norberto, or his bearing, had to be considered great or noble, while her grandmother thought she had learned of certain events in his career that well might make him appear ignoble in the eyes of a woman whose love he would command. 'Angels, no. We women are not worthy of them, but you know that in times gone by there were men capable of heroic deeds, self-sacrifice, things great and noble.'

The Senora laughed with relief. 'You mean you would marry an ideal,' she said. 'Put it out of your thoughts, *hija*. A man must be dead a hundred years, and so past woman's love or marriage, before he can be canonised and personify the ideal. Meanwhile one must accept the possible and be thankful. Norberto is *buen mozo* and madly in love with you. Be content.'

Carmen shrugged her shoulders. The thought of Norberto's love in connection with their marriage was a new one. She found it wondrously comforting, though she doubted the reality of his passion. The question of expediency had so long been prominent in her mind that, though she recalled with insistence the few words and signs he had given her of admiration or sympathy, the days in which she was ex-

pected to formulate her answer passed in painful indecision. Norberto had once whispered that he adored her. Why did he not repeat it now? She had felt that at least the words were sweet, whether they came from his heart or no.

CHAPTER VII

WHILE Carmen Valdivia was in the house of her aunt in the city of Mexico she had been more than once the object of that species of homage locally known as '*haciendo el oso*.' A man may well be described as 'making a bear' or any other uncouth animal of himself while performing the antics to which custom decrees the young Mexican must dedicate himself when he would attract the attention and favour of his chosen fair.

He stands for hours within sight of the window of his inamorata, or paces the street like some distracted or abstracted lunatic, casting lovelorn glances, quite indifferent to the smiles and shrugs of the passers-by, while the lady peeps from behind the curtains of her window, or stands upon her balcony covertly smiling behind her fan, or with lithe fingers conveying in signs that which her lips may not tell.

Curiously enough the veriest stranger may venture thus publicly to manifest the flame

which chaste beauty kindles in his breast, and the highest born as well as the lowest maiden gains lustre to her fame by discreet acknowledgment of the compliment paid her by this open recognition of her charms.

If the admirer meets the approval of the hidden duenna as well as that of the lady more immediately concerned, the young couple are permitted to continue their courtship to the edification of the neighbours, and even when night lends her screen of darkness the lover may approach the barred window and whisper and receive impassioned vows and exchange sweet confidences. On the contrary, if he is unwelcome his summary dismissal, by some male member of the lady's family, creates a pleasing episode for the onlookers, and an occasion for much dramatic despair on the part of the rejected swain.

The eligibility of a lover, however, and the declaration of his passion, does not, as one might reasonably suppose, open to him the doors of his lady's home. Quite the reverse. He is looked upon as of all beings the most dangerous. Etiquette requires that, even if he has been before a frequent visitor, he shall refrain from presenting himself until all preliminaries to the marriage are arranged; and even during an

engagement lovers seldom exchange a word except in the presence of friends, or through protecting bars or the safe height of some upper balcony.

These conditions still remain almost unmodified. Elderly Mexicans remember the eagerness with which marriage was sought in their time, by reason of the restraint enforced in intercourse between the unmarried of both sexes, and to the young there is infinite fascination in the exchange of whispered words and amorous glances at dusk, or in the elusive moonlight, or, better still, in darkness pierced by the glowing point of a perfumed cigarette.

But at Tlaltelzingo the high walls within which the great house is placed would seem to forbid the near approach of even the most adventurous lover. Though Carmen had heard the Spanish equivalent of 'Love will find a way,' she had no expectation that her communication with Norberto would be personal, or of such a nature as to assist her in her deliberations. The most she could anticipate was to catch a glimpse of him at Mass on Sundays, or to receive from time to time a decorous note, which might be shown to her grandmother should the old lady unwisely demand it. True, the front of the house forms

a part of the massive wall, and its windows look upon the open country, but they are heavily barred with iron, and at night additionally secured by cedar shutters that it takes a man's strength to unfold. The doors of the *patio* also are impregnable, and guarded by a *portero*, who would refuse to open even to Cupid in person. Upon its rear and sides the building appears equally unassailable, for courts and walled gardens surround it. The sleeping apartments mostly overlook the space lying towards the village, which is separated from the garden by an unscaleable wall that protects the Senora's cherished fruits and flowers; above which hang the balconies, with swelling encasements like cages, ranged at regular intervals.

To this garden there is an entrance only from the house, and this small door, placed at the foot of a steep stairway, is locked each night by the major-domo, who carries the key with others to the room of his master; and safety and silence falls upon its secluded precincts.

The garden is terraced, and the roses and gardenias with which it is planted stand almost upon a level with the base of the windows, but separated from them by a steep slope which descends to the foundations of the house walls.

A person standing upon the wide sill of the windows looks, downward, as into a narrow trough, but outward and upward may see quite above the tops of trees, and, himself unseen, count the huts of the village and the storm-marks on the barren hillsides which seem to reach the overarching sky. So, in spite of isolation, one commands a view which gives a sense of space and freedom, and satisfies the eye by the contrasts of human habitations with the wide solitudes of Nature. Free airs are breathed, and sights and sounds perceived, which seem to bring from distant places echoes of the music and stir and turmoil of life.

Carmen had always been conscious of such impressions as these, but they had been stronger and more absorbing since her return from the city, especially at night, when, restless from tormenting thoughts, she would rise from her bed and stand in her window, following with her eyes some shadow upon the mountain, wondering whether it was that of bird, or beast, or man. Listening to the voices of Nature, and to that new, shrill scream that, when the wind served, was borne to her ears like a cry from a human throat—the whistle of the locomotive, that seemed to shriek to her, ‘return, return, return.’

She heard it one starlit night, the third since Don Ranulfo had taken her unsatisfactory reply to Norberto Sanchez.

‘Oh, if I could only return,’ she said aloud. ‘But what would it matter? I should only hear there what they tell me here—that it is my duty to marry Norberto.’

‘Angel of my life,’ answered a voice, ‘there could be no better words spoken, unless you tell me that you love me,’ and to her intense surprise, and momentary alarm, a man’s figure, clad in a black riding suit, that rendered him almost indistinguishable from the surrounding objects, stepped out from the shade of flowering shrubs and approached as near as the slope of the ground would allow.

She uttered an exclamation, but did not scream. She believed the garden impregnable, except when entered by the connivance of him who held the key to the door. This she knew to be her Uncle Isidor, and she angrily resented his supposed complacence. The ingenuity and daring often shown in compassing clandestine interviews give them their chief charm, even to love-lorn damsels, and to Carmen could alone save the present one from being an insult and a threat.

‘Don Norberto,’ she cried, ‘my uncle has

forgotten himself! Does he care nothing for the dignity of the family? And you—this mode of using his friendship does not please me. I beg you to leave me.'

Don Norberto laughed. Perhaps, purposely, he raised his voice that it might be recognised if some sleeper should be disturbed. 'Your impetuosity is one of your chief charms,' he said. 'Believe me, your uncle knows nothing of my visit here, and at most Fernando has lent only passive countenance, by refraining to block up, in all these years, the hole in the wall by which we used to creep in when we were boys and rob your grandmother's favourite mango tree.' He pointed to a mass of vines and shrubs in an angle of the wall, where an aperture might easily remain undetected.

Carmen was appeased, and even felt amused as well as relieved as she answered,—

'Fernando is greatly to blame for his carelessness! It is well that the village boys did not learn your secret, or if they did, they have respected it, and are more honest than you and Fernando used to be. But,' she added archly, 'if you want mangoes now, pluck them, I will not tell upon you.'

'Carmencita, of my life,' cried the young man, eagerly, and with a burning glance that

the greyness of the night seemed only to intensify, 'I want sweeter fruit. Your heart, yourself—ah!'

Carmen drew back, as though his hand had thrust her. At the same moment the slow creaking of a window was heard, and they knew that their unguarded voices had reached some alert ear. Carmen divined that it was that of her grandmother, and involuntarily quailed with a sense of guilt, but Norberto repeated her name with a confidence that showed he feared no interruption if his identity should be established; and the result proved him right, for, presently, there was the click of a closing latch, and the young couple knew that they were free to continue the conference.

Don Norberto took advantage to urge his suit in impassioned tones. Carmen listened with a degree of pleasure but far more curiosity. She could not conceive how or why she had become the object of such sudden devotion, when in times gone by this same cavalier had been at little pains to conceal his indifference; and to these reflections she presently gave utterance.

'I am the same Carmen I used to be,' she said, 'neither wiser nor better.'

'But more beautiful. Oh, yes! it is true.

As Fernando says, "It is no longer who will choose Carmen Valdivia, but who will she choose?" And I have no mind that another shall step in and bear away the flower that has been fostered for me.'

'Yet had its colour and perfume pleased you less,' answered Carmen, with a faint smile, 'you would have rejected it.'

'No, by my faith; but before the bud burst into the perfect flower Fernando would have found me a harder creditor to deal with than would have suited the interests of Tlaltelzingo. But now, Queen of my Life! it is you who shall dispose as you will. Only be mine!'

'Who would have believed my value could have risen so greatly in the short interval between child and womanhood?' thought Carmen, her lip curling. Norberto's advance to meet her on her return to Mexico seemed to her now like the act of a Sultan anxious to inspect a slave before he would buy. Norberto continued to pour forth voluble praises of her beauty, and though the young girl felt that her physical charms alone moved him, there was a certain pleasure to her in the thought that, at least until her beauty faded, she would not be an unloved bride.

Though she had recoiled from giving her

assent to the proposed marriage, though she still recoiled, she had no doubt that it was inevitable, and the basest love was, for the moment, preferable to his utter indifference. She longed to be able to invest her suitor with the glamour of some noble attribute, to be able to fear or respect him, even if she could not love.

But Norberto was unfortunate in the themes he chose to dilate upon. He decried the merit of every man in families of rank equal to their own who might see and possibly admire her. Gossip and innuendo flowed from his lips in a rapid stream, mingled with boastful praises of his own character, which Carmen was thus compelled to remember, even to her ears, had not always been blameless. She wearied of his pretensions, of his malice and his egotism, and when he renewed his protestations of love she was dismayed to find that they almost moved her to laughter, for she knew full well that laughter is fatal to sentiment.

‘Oh, if I loved him!’ she thought, ‘or could ever hope to love him, or even if his love for me were more than a passing whim, how delightful this might be! But now, how inexpressibly ridiculous are those declamations, those vows and sighs. And to think that when I marry him I shall have to dissemble always. Yes!

Long after he may cease to do so. Oh ! shall I have to go about all my life laughing in my sleeve, and weeping in my heart, and feigning devotion, yes—though at the moment he may believe himself in earnest—feigning devotion as he is doing now?’

Norberto guessed nothing of what was passing in her mind. Her very desperation led her to laugh when she could have wept, and to coquetry when he most repelled her. The knowledge that their marriage was a foregone conclusion on his part, as well as that of her family, made it appear inevitable to her, yet she struggled against the final yielding of herself to this puppet, this doll who she vaguely felt was deficient in every quality that could make him her peer, yet who was soon to dominate her existence.

When he left her, after vainly striving to kiss the hand which she extended, but which he was neither tall nor supple enough to reach, and she watched him disappear under the pendant vines upon the wall, she felt as though he dragged after him a slender chain that bound her to his will. Yet the day of the old *régime* was past. No one could force her to marry. The law of the land would protect her if she chose to invoke it. Yet the traditions of her

race, the pride of family, the subtle influences of environment dominated her. The wings of her mind, which had fluttered in the freer air, drooped in the lifeless atmosphere of her early associations.

Don Norberto had to ride ten miles through the still night to reach his home. Carmen wished she had such a task before her, while he envied her her near proximity to her bed. Though he was sufficiently enamoured to find his pursuit of her exciting, he impatiently desired it should soon end, not altogether because he longed for the wedding (business details in which he had no mind to be loser would necessarily delay it), but because he was constitutionally nervous and haunted by superstitious fears. The night was full of terrors to him, and again and again he made a mental vow that when Carmen's promise was once won he would indulge his longing to see her only in the safe and shadeless hours of daylight.

Meanwhile Carmen had sought her bed, chilled in heart as well as body, half ashamed of the tear that stole over her cheek. Oh, in all the world is there a sentiment so harassing and so little understood as the discontent of an immature mind blindly seeking the good it is too ignorant to separate from evil?

Carmen Valdivia, but for this early marriage to which she was destined, would scarcely yet have dreamed of love, but now she was eager to pluck its rose with all its thorns ; but this Norberto offered her seemed but a garish blossom from the fen. When she would clasp it to her bosom it raised no gentle flame, but seemed to scorch and blast.

There was a subdued air of excitement at Tlaltelzingo on the following day, and for many after, but Carmen was nervous and irritable or *distract*. She hinted to Fernando that the garden wall was not intact, but he feigned incredulity, and avoided her confidences, as, indeed, she expected he would do. Her grandmother maintained an imperturbable mien, and Carmen wondered how much she really knew of the nocturnal interviews, which, in spite of herself, grew to have an absorbing interest. The play with love, or the struggle with its tragedy, is often the only diversion, either glad or sorrowful, in the life of a Mexican girl. And so it was with Carmen.

The nights continued warm and fair, although it was the rainy season, and Norberto took frequent advantage of the respite from storm and flood to present himself at Carmen's window. There was something in his personality that,

while he was with her, roused her least noble trait and proclivities. She amused herself, and tormented him, with coquetries and coy repulses, which, when she afterwards recalled them, seemed so like cajoleries that she writhed in shame and scorn of herself. Then she felt herself worthy only of the destiny that she saw closing around her—that of being enmeshed in an outwardly suitable marriage, where it would become her part to offer the blandishments of which Norberto was now impatiently prodigal.

CHAPTER VIII

MORE than once in the city Carmen Valdivia had set her friends laughing by recounting the various objections her grandmother had advanced against the introductions of railroads into the country, more especially that part of it in which lay Tlaltelzingo, and had usually ended by saying, with an irreverent imitation of the Senora's voice and manner,—

‘They are vulgar devices for huddling people together. It is impossible to maintain the privacy desirable among relations and friends with a steam engine at one's very door.’

As the door was, in her case, represented by Cruz-Roja, thirty miles away, and the nearest relative lived at Casco, a small town fifty miles down the lines, it seemed as though the Senora's ideas of propinquity might be modified. Still the facility with which the distance could be covered was a genuine cause of anxiety to her. Though small, the town contained its full quota of idle youths of the aristocratic

class, who affected Fernando's favourite vice of gambling for unlimited stakes. And in spite of the ill luck that had attended him in Mexico, it was not long, after his return, when the quiet of the hacienda palled upon him, and he began to invent excuses for a trip to Casco.

In former days, when the journey was something to be prepared for seriously, the Senora had often in Fernando's case exerted her authority, and in that of Don Isidor her cajoleries or wrath, to prevent the journey. But now by the train it was a matter of but a few hours, and needed only the employment of the gentleman's own saddle horse and a single servant to reach the station. No escort was necessary for the Valdivias on their own roads to Cruz-Roja, and even though robberies in the country between that village and Casco had become more frequent than ever, the travellers by train had no need to fear, and might laugh at the terror which prevailed among the frequenters of the old lonely byeways.

The Senora had hoped that the superior attractions of the great city would have made those of Casco insignificant and despicable in the eyes of Fernando. On the contrary, excitement, however peurile, had become a necessity of his nature, and the uncertainty that overhung the course of affairs at Tlaltelzingo made it

impossible for him to remain there quietly until their future status should be decided.

He expressed himself, however, as quite unaffected by his sister's hesitation. 'There could be,' he said, 'but one ending to the matter. She was not so silly as to endanger the lands of Tlaltelzingo when an arrangement was so easily to be reached, and in the manner that must naturally be to her liking.'

But that he was not so confident as he would have her believe, Carmen shrewdly guessed, and as a punishment for the careless indifference (she would not call it selfishness) which threw upon her the onus of bringing the long-standing complications between the haciendas of Santa-Trinita and Tlaltelzingo to a conclusion, she was not unwilling to prolong his anxiety. Every day of freedom seemed to grow sweeter and dearer as the time approached to end them for ever. Following the traditions of her race she was tacitly resolved to eventually sacrifice herself for the benefit of her family, but, with a perversity born of modern reasonings, she was not unwilling that the family should recognise the effort.

That Fernando did recognise it, and that he even doubted her powers of abnegation, was shown by the air of mingled reproach

and compunction that he wore before her ; his inability to interest himself in the affairs and pleasures of the hacienda, and the alacrity with which he seized upon the first pretext that presented itself to hurry away to Casco, and also in the unexpected brevity of his visit.

His grandmother was delighted by his return without having to report any fresh losses, and plied him with questions concerning their several friends and acquaintances. To hide his annoyance at Carmen's continued inaction, he affected a merry mood, and repeated the gossip he had heard with that sharpness and witty appreciation of the bearing of current events which is characteristic of Mexican small talk.

He was particularly explicit in describing the melancholy plight of a young girl who was said to be on the eve of taking the veil on account of a disappointment in love, and of another who, after refusing a dozen good matches, was about to bestow herself upon a vicious half-wit.

‘That is what one might expect of a girl as perverse as Panchita,’ cried the Senora. ‘Good men are scarce, and she who rejects the chance to secure one, marries a fool in the end, or remains to dress saints or lead

apes' (the peculiar employments the Mexican popularly assigns to old maids). 'Panchita is twenty and will soon be older; she did well to marry Pépe, even with his crackbrain, and deserves the pearl necklace her grandmother will give her.'

'You have a better one,' said Carmen, saucily. 'But what are pearls when even diamonds would look dim if one were always weeping?'

'The saints be praised your eyes are likely ever to be bright enough to see anything good that comes in your way,' answered the Senora, significantly. 'There is no night dark enough to obscure the vision of a wise woman.'

Carmen blushed, and exclaimed, 'What else have you to tell us, Fernando? Has nobody lost a fortune, or nobody died? I remember there were graveyards as well as gaming-tables in Casco.'

Fernando laughed. 'They are both done away with,' he replied, with a side grimace at his grandmother. 'One may go there with impunity for the place itself is dead. Everybody there is a saint—therefore also dead, though they walk about and refuse to be buried. The only thing that galvanises them into life is the fear of the bandits on the hills. It is said the

rascals have grown so bold they have even tried to wreck a railroad train.'

'Then thank the Virgin you are home and never need risk your life on one again,' cried the Senora. '*Ave Maria Sanctissima*, the world grows more wicked every day!'

'That is quite true!' ejaculated Carmen, crossing herself.

'It must be,' said the Senora, 'that those godless Americans have put this infamy into the heads of our people.' She had read of such things in the foreign papers, and they seemed to her far more horrible than the crimes of highwaymen who showed nice discrimination in choosing their victims. 'Even a Valdivia would not be safe from train robbers.'

'*Caramba!*' ejaculated Fernando. 'I would rather take my chances in an explosion of dynamite than among the road bandits to-day. The road to Cruz-Roja is safe enough; even Pedro Ortiz would not attack me on my own territory. But thence on the hills towards Casco there is no respect of persons. Never were so many outrages committed. "What Peter leaves Paul takes." The people do not know to what saint to commend themselves. They say Pedro Ortiz is the leader of the gang, and that of late he has become a very devil.'

‘Strange that the *rurales* cannot hunt him down,’ said Carmen, thoughtfully. ‘He did not seem to use much caution when we saw him.’

‘He probably knew whom he would meet,’ replied Fernando. ‘It is said that the same man is even now acting as his chief aid, but he is so cunning that he eludes every plot set to trap him.’

‘You mean Cosme Rul?’ asked Carmen, incredulously.

‘Yes; but he will be found out sooner or later. For my part I think, as many others do, that there is an understanding between the bandits and the railway people to break up the business of the muleteers and compel the *rancheros*, that still cling to the old way of freighting, to employ the trains. It is peculiar, to say the least, that between points reached by the railroad scarce a muleteer escapes robbery, and many have been murdered, while further back in the country they are comparatively safe. But speaking of Cosme Rul, the fellow is actually mysterious in his cunning and daring.’

The Senora, as well as Carmen, looked at Fernando.

‘What have you heard of him?’ asked the latter.

Fernando laughed. 'Well, it seems the *rurales*' (he spoke of the mounted police, many of whom have been bandits themselves) 'have sworn either to force him into their ranks or to kill him as an accomplice of Ortiz, but have been unable to catch a glimpse of him. I was talking to Gonzales, the chief of police, yesterday, and he said they were determined to make an example of him.'

'An example of what?' exclaimed Carmen, warmly. 'Of the stupidity of the *rurales*? It is a shame, Fernando, that you do not interfere and insist that no man from Tlaltelzingo shall be molested without just cause.'

'That is just what I did do,' began Fernando ; while Carmen continued,—

'What we saw at the river ought to be proof that the man is maligned. Oh ! I shall never forget it !'

'Nor I either,' said Fernando. 'I described the whole thing to Gonzales ; and though he knows that Cosme Rul was seen in the same district as Ortiz, and that he actually decoyed the *rurales* from the spot where the villain might have been captured, the chief was mightily moved, and I was proceeding to argue my case in the best possible manner, when who should walk up but Cosme Rul himself.'

‘Impossible!’ cried Carmen and the Senora in unison.

‘*Caramba!* you are not half so surprised as Gonzales and I were. We were both so taken aback that we listened like two schoolboys; while humbly saluting me, and begging my pardon for troubling me, he drew some small change from his belt and begged me to carry it to his sister Selsa, that she might buy a black gown to wear in memory of his mother. Gonzales and I both stared, with the water in our eyes; but after the fellow was gone we called ourselves idiots to be so taken in.’

‘And why?’ cried Carmen. ‘You know what shame and grief it is, to even the poorest, to be unable to put on some sign of mourning.’

‘But a black dress for his sister! Where on earth did the fellow get the money from?’ And, with an expression of disgust, Fernando emptied his pocket and delivered the little pile of silver and copper to Carmen.

‘Give it to Padre Nicanor to pay for a mass for the mother’s soul,’ said the Senora.

But Carmen carried the money to Selsa, knowing well the consolation that the observance of certain social obligations gives to the poor.

Selsa cried over Cosme’s gift, and also that

he had not come to her. As Fernando had done, she said,—

‘Where can he have got the money?’

‘Doubtless he has worked,’ suggested Carmen. But Selsa shook her head.

‘Would he go away from his own *tierra* to work?’ she answered incredulously.

And Carmen felt, against her will, that the balance of probability leaned heavily towards the adoption by the young *peon* of the life of adventure to which not infrequently individuals of his race turn in sudden revolt against the ordinary monotony or suffering of their lot. Still she could not bring herself to believe that Pedro Ortiz, the evil genius of poor Juana, and her unhappy son were in actual association. Yet what could Gonzales have meant when he said that Cosme had decoyed the *rurales* from the hiding-place of the bandit?

In the interview with Norberto Sanchez, which took place a few hours later, the incident of Fernando’s meeting with Cosme formed the principal subject of conversation between him and Carmen, for he showed enough personal vindictiveness against the *peon* to give her an excuse to attempt to prove how unnatural were the suspicions against him. Her chief interest in the argument was that it kept her lover

from the too ardent discussion of their own relations and affairs. Nevertheless, it was apparent that they were approaching a climax, and when they parted it was with an almost decisive understanding. Carmen's hopeless temporising was losing its power to delude her into a dream of final escape, and she began to feel a feverish desire to end the uncertainty and irony of the situation.

She had formed a habit by night, as well as by day, of looking into the sky. But the stars, no more than the sun, gave her any counsel or reassuring sign. From behind her bars she felt an intense longing for freedom. There was a tradition, she remembered, that married women succumb to destiny and lose that spirit of revolt that makes life so hard to foolish virgins. She herself had seen wild, rebellious birds caged, as she thought Norberto would cage her, and they had no longer struggled, but had sat mutely and drooped behind their golden bars until they died.

What mattered it, after all, if such would be her fate, so that Tlaltelzingo might remain intact and Fernando be enabled to carry on the line and dignities of the Valdivias? In her mind she began to formulate the terms in which she should yield to the importunities of her lover

at their next meeting. There was, however, but one point which became clear. She would tell him plainly that, though she did not actively dislike, neither did she love him. Also that her consent to marry him was dictated alone by the interests of her family, but that, if he willed to have her for his wife, her fealty should go with her plighted word.

‘If that will content him,’ she reflected, ‘he must love me madly, and surely I shall learn to love him after all.’

Her cheek burned and her heart throbbed. She had heard unhappy wives, bending low over the head of a child, whisper how dear for its sake the man before whom they trembled had become. When all was said, Norberto Sanchez was no ogre, no despot like the ancestor she had heard of who had caused the hair of his loveless wife to be shorn, and had ordered her to dress in such mean apparel that no stranger would cast a second glance upon her and thus discover her beauty.

Such thoughts, idle and tormenting, passed through her mind as, sneering at her own vanity, she donned a *négligée* of silk and lace, and stepped into the barred balcony of her window, minded, if Norberto came, as the softness of the night indicated he would, to end the

farce of a courtship that was so wearisome to mind and body.

To her surprise she waited long. The starlight waned, the night air grew chill, and her resolution weakened and seemed about to die, and yet Norberto did not come. At length she sighed with relief, then was about to turn away in anger, with the thought, 'I almost promised him, when last he was here, that this night I would give him my answer, yet he has not come. Is he then so sure of what I must say that he acts the confident lover already?'

Her glance swept the garden, and by chance fell within the well-like space below her window. To her surprise a man was standing there, drawn close to the wall, deep in the shadow of the stone coping of her balcony. 'What,' she thought, with a start, 'should Norberto be doing there? Had he been watching her face as the starlight lit it? Had he been listening to reflections that she had unguardedly uttered in her fancied solitude?'

She called his name angrily, but when she glanced again she saw that the man was taller than Norberto. He could have touched her where he stood. She noted also that though he was dressed in a dark riding suit, such as her lover wore on his nocturnal excursions, there was

something in this man's attitude that indicated a lower caste. This prevented the alarm she would have felt had the intruder been an aristocrat. She immediately conjectured he was a servant sent by Sanchez to explain the cause of his own non-appearance. Her only definite emotion was vexation that the secret of the entrance to the garden should be known even to his personal attendant. Another thread of the web it seemed to her which was enmeshing her.

‘Give me the letter!’ she exclaimed impetuously, as the man stepped up the bank and stood facing her. She conjectured that Norberto had written to explain his failure to keep his tryst, but she started when her eyes fell upon the face of the supposed messenger. It was that of Cosme Rul.

‘There is no letter, *Senorita*,’ he said quietly, as she uttered an exclamation. ‘Pardon. There is no letter.’

‘No letter?’ she echoed.

Yet she realised that she would have been still more surprised if Norberto had indeed chosen Cosme Rul as his messenger. ‘Then why are you here?’

‘That you, *Senorita*, may lose no sleep in waiting for Don Norberto,’ he answered in a

tone of grave respect. 'He will not come to-night, *Niña*. Oh! pardon if that grieves you, but there still remains your whole life to make up for the sadness of this one hour.'

Carmen was accustomed to the mingled sentimentality and irony of which, in speech, a *peon* is capable. She looked at him narrowly, but she could not determine how much of either she could credit this man with. Remembering his dubious reputation, she exclaimed in alarm,—

'What do you mean? What has happened to Don Norberto?'

'No harm, *Senorita*; on my life, no harm,' cried the *peon*, earnestly.

'Still something has happened,' insisted Carmen. 'Something terrible?'

The ghost of a smile flitted over the man's face. It angered, yet reassured Carmen even more than his words. 'He is as safe as the babe in its mother's arms, *Niña*, though for a moment he was frightened. More,' he added in an undertone, 'than I could have believed a cavalier would ever be.'

Carmen gasped, '*Ave Maria Sanctisima!* you—'

'*Niña*,' interrupted the man, with slow patience, 'it happened in this way. I have met and talked with Pedro Ortiz; you know what lies

between us. I tried to kill him with my *machete*, for I have no other weapon. But he is not to be killed except by a bullet ; a witch told him that years ago.'

'Go on,' urged Carmen, breathlessly.

'It is a pity pistols cost so much money,' ruminated the *peon*, 'and I have no money.'

'Yet you gave some to Fernando for Selsa to spend in buying a mourning dress,' interposed Carmen.

'True, *Niña*, the mother would have expected it, and a few *tlacos* are nothing. But pistols—I could not wait to earn money to buy such costly things. The *rurales* were on the track of Ortiz.'

'And you decoyed them away,' cried Carmen. 'Then that is true, that you saved him?'

'Ah, yes, *Niña*,' he answered patiently, 'for it is I who must kill him.'

'*Dios mio*,' cried Carmen, 'but what has this to do with Norberto Sanchez?'

'Ah, *Senorita*, they say that you love him, that he comes every night to visit you ; I remembered that his pistols are beautiful. With one of them one may be sure of his aim. Besides, I thought, "Perhaps the *Senorita* will have handled them and given them luck."'

‘You have robbed him!’ cried Carmen. ‘It is true then you are a bandit? It is because of the feud brought about by your mother’s death that you are now against this man Pedro Ortiz, else you would be his friend—a bandit as you before have been.’

‘No, *Senorita*, never in all my life have I stolen from any man. Because I would not rob and kill, Pedro Ortiz became my enemy years ago. Because he was a bandit I would not suffer my mother nor her children to eat the bread he would have given them. I worked while yet a child to support them all. I would have died to shield them—her—my mother; but he was too cunning for me. He broke the oath I forced him to make, and went into the house that was mine, and played upon her foolish love and the fears the priest had set in her mind when I prayed her to forget the husband who was her curse. Yet she could not forget him. He laid a spell upon her! He led her away to her death! There—there—in the terrible river. You saw it, *Niña*. He killed her, and I will kill him.’

The excitement of this man, of a race so stoical, was terrible to see. It thrilled the listener like fire, yet she shivered from head to foot. She knew she ought to remonstrate with

him, but she could find no words in which to do so. In spite of her will she felt a subtle sympathy with his determination, and said weakly,—

‘ You spoke to Fernando in Cruz-Roja. Why did you not ask him for money ? ’

‘ To buy pistols ? To kill the man whose wife had been drowned ? ’ said the *peon*, bitterly. ‘ Ah, *Niña*, you know what the Senor would have said : “ Take the *rurales* to his hiding-place and they will end this bandit’s life for you.” Besides, who thinks but that a knife is good enough to settle a poor man’s quarrel ? ’

Carmen felt the force of his reasoning. How sweet revenge must be that he should so long for it ! Then she thought of Norberto, and the irony of fate that had suggested to the *peon* the possibility of wresting, from the man who bore him a groundless enmity, the means of gratifying his own just revenge.

She laughed softly. ‘ Was he truly frightened ? ’ she asked.

‘ I would not say that,’ said Cosme Rul, divining of whom she spoke. ‘ I do not know much, Senorita, of the ways of cavaliers ; but he seemed neither to see nor hear, though the night was clear and still. He offered me his money and his watch, calling me his good

Pedro. He could not understand I was Cosme and only wanted his pistols as a loan. Even Juan, the *mozo*, would not listen.'

'They were both frightened out of their wits,' thought Carmen, and laughed again. Then suddenly her amusement changed to anger. She was humiliated at the picture of the craven Norberto that her quick imagination supplied.

'How dared you tell me this?' she demanded. 'How dared you come to me with your murderous plans? What is your revenge to me? Go! Go, I say!'

She stamped her foot and advanced threateningly to the bars. The man was so near she almost could have struck him with her hand. She actually seemed about to do so; but he did not recoil. He looked at her with a wondering, innocent surprise—a sort of naïve wonder and worship—then silently withdrew into the darkness, and the strange interview was over, almost before Carmen realised that it had occurred.

'I will tell Fernando to-morrow,' she thought. 'The gap must be repaired.'

But on the morrow she did not tell, for news reached the hacienda that seemed to put her on her honour to keep the secret of the *peon*.

The robbery of Don Norberto Sanchez was proclaimed as a crime attended by violence of the most determined character, in which bloodshed had been averted only by the valour of the gentleman and his servant.

Don Norberto himself did not appear at the hacienda, but Don Ranulfo hastened to give a Falstaffian account of the matter, which was evidently taken from the lips of Juan the servant, Don Norberto being too much exhausted by his exertions of the previous night to converse even with so intimate a friend. He was, in fact, suffering from a nervous collapse, which was perhaps more directly due to constitutional weakness than to the cowardice that Carmen disdainfully attributed to him.

The account of the affair given by Don Ranulfo to the family at Tlaltelzingo was the same as reported to the police. Don Norberto Sanchez and his servant were riding a little before midnight upon the road lying between Santa-Trinita and Tlaltelzingo, and at a point about midway of the two places, where a dense thicket afforded a convenient covert, when a number of horsemen had suddenly sallied out and demanded arms, threatening death if refused. Both men had distinctly recognised the voices of Pedro Ortiz and Cosme Rul, and swore to

the fact that the latter had seemed the principal in the affray.

‘Was he not the only one?’ questioned Carmen.

‘How is that possible?’ answered Don Ranulfo. ‘No, no; Juan gives his word that there were at least a score of villains shouting in the thicket, and as he and Norberto would turn their horses, vainly striving to gain an advantage, some man, lithe as a cat, would spring before them.’

‘The thicket throws strange shadows in the starlight,’ said Carmen. ‘I have seen them myself, and the rocky wall of the ridge throws back a thousand echoes.’

‘*Callate hija,*’ interposed the Senora with a frown. ‘Be silent. Is Don Norberto a child that he should be frightened by shadows and echoes? The police will soon find the ruffians that caused them, and though it will not be to the credit of Tlaltelzingo, the sooner Cosme Rul and his stepfather pay the penalty of their crimes the better.’

‘Oh, it is impossible they should escape, now they are on this side of the valley,’ cried Don Ranulfo, reassuringly. ‘Don Norberto has offered a reward; that will rouse the *rurales* to the utmost. Besides, they are enraged at

that fellow Cosme for sending them on a fool's errand when they had so nearly trapped his chief. A bullet will settle his account as soon as they catch sight of him. He will find no mercy.'

Carmen, who was about to offer the explanation of the seemingly murderous attack, was silent. A word, a look from her, might set the hunters upon the track of the man who had trusted her.

To Norberto alone—Norberto, when she had given him her troth—could she reveal what she knew. In the first flush of triumph, of love, he surely would comprehend what was so clear to her own mind.

She awaited his coming that night with impatience ; upon the next with doubt ; and after that with scorn and contempt. He did not come, but each day sent her passionate and imploring epistles, which she read with curling lips. Perhaps the last thing a woman suspects in man is cowardice, and it is the hardest to pardon. To Carmen it was too contemptible even to be mentioned. Her pride prevented her from giving any sign that her lover's visits had ceased, and Norberto's reputation for gallantry, from certain circumstances which followed, increased rather than lessened as time went by.

CHAPTER IX

A WELL-KNOWN story in Mexico is that of a certain general who, in the last revolutionary struggle, when in stress for funds, appeared with his soldiers at the house of a sympathiser and courteously, but firmly, demanded a loan of fifty thousand dollars; and when the suggestion was made that the affair appeared very like robbery, said airily,—

‘No, no!—mere occupation—mere change of employers.’

It was never learned that the money was repaid, but doubtless the explanation gave hope that it might be, and vindicated the general’s honour to his own satisfaction.

This was the point of view from which Carmen regarded the affair of Cosme Rul’s forcible seizure of the pistols. They were to be made to serve a certain purpose, and would be returned. She would have explained the matter fully to Norberto had he given her an opportunity. It was perhaps natural that it did

not occur to him, nor to the *rurales*, who were however puzzled by the fact that no money or other valuables had been taken from the person of Norberto Sanchez. Pedro Ortiz and his associates were not usually so considerate.

For some days after the robbery there was much coming and going between Santa-Trinita and Tlaltelzingo. The *rurales* scoured the country in every direction, but no trace of an armed band was to be found, and, but for the reiterated testimony of Juan, the *mozo*, confirmed by that of his master, the expert and experienced seekers would have declared that no force of horsemen had traversed the roads for many months.

Certain it was, though, that Pedro Ortiz had abandoned his old haunts. Conflicting rumours of his movements harassed and confused the police. Amidst them Cosme Rul was for the time almost forgotten, or thought of only as one of many ; though gradually it seemed to dawn upon Norberto Sanchez that his was the only face that he had seen clearly upon the night of the assault. In his secret mind he may have realised that their terrors had conjured up the figures of the associates by which he and his servant had conceived themselves surrounded, yet even to himself he would not—could not—

acknowledge that he had yielded his arms to the demand of a solitary *peon*. Thus the search continued for a band of banditti where not a trace of them was to be found, and Cosme Rul was given almost a certainty of immunity from arrest as he penetrated wilds and fastnesses unthought of by the lynx-eyed *rurales*.

As Carmen listened to the theories advanced by the officers and her brother and uncle, she was at first filled with trepidation, mingled with amusement and excitement, such as that with which she might have followed the fortunes of some wild animal pitted against a trained pack of hounds. Later she was amazed that they did not suspect the pusillanimity of Norberto Sanchez, which had led him to mislead them by acquiescing in the fabulous tales of his *mozo*. On the contrary he was constantly spoken of admiringly as a man without fear, and she was more than once smilingly appealed to, to confirm this judgment.

Had Cosme Rul made but the one visit to her window she would perhaps have yielded to her growing desire to bring ridicule and confusion upon the man whom she was learning to detest as well as despise. At least Norberto Sanchez would have been spared the burden of the reputation of a hero, which could be ill main-

tained by the inditing of model love letters, the sentiment and passion of which soon became the merest bathos to the receiver. But because the shadow of a man was sometimes seen at night in the secluded garden she dared not speak, and it was supposed by the family at Tlaltelzingo that their neighbour was playing a part when he declared himself too ill to leave Santa-Trinita. It did not occur to anyone that any other than he knew the secret entrance or would dare to use it. Carmen herself had been amazed and angered—but chiefly against Norberto—when for the second time she had discovered the *peon* beneath her window.

Upon that day the *rurales* had gone to the forest by the river where the party had spent the memorable night of the storm, yet there was a general unrest and vigilance kept at Tlaltelzingo, which made it seem little less than madness for Cosme Rul to venture there. Carmen, with beating heart, commanded him to depart, not because she reflected that his appearance there—even at her window—could compromise her. Was he not a *peon*, and she—Carmen Valdivia? But because she knew that in the excitement of the time, in any place, at any moment, if seen he might be shot down, even by the watchmen of his own village.

But Cosme Rul seemed enwrapped in a cloak of invisibility or an armour of darkness that made him incapable of fear, and he was, as well, absolutely faultless in calculating the time and circumstances in which he might evade discovery. His seeming recklessness was indeed the most subtle caution. But had it not been so, he would have found it impossible in his midnight wanderings to pass that spot where he felt a sort of divinity—a mystic surety of success — was enshrined. As she from her pride, so he from his deep humility had no consciousness that his presence could compromise her honour, any more than when kneeling at some wayside shrine he might affect that of his patron, Santa Maria de Guadalupe. Like that saint in heaven, Carmen here on earth, he thought, strengthened his soul for the one absorbing enterprise in which he was involved.

These interviews were few in number and lasted but a few moments. Cosme made no pretext for coming and Carmen asked none. She knew that in some way she held over the *peon* an influence that incited him to tireless effort and ruthless vengeance, even while she uttered passionate arguments against it. She urged him vainly to make her his advocate with Norberto and the *rurales*, yet she would have

been strangely dissatisfied had he done so. No, no, he himself must destroy Pedro Ortiz.

They talked in fragmentary sentences, Carmen unconsciously revealing, as truly as he, the elements of such natures as those stern moralists possessed who framed the law 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' Yet they were both children of the Church as they knew it. But dogma was weaker than passion in the mind of the one, or sympathy in that of the other. Carmen's heart burned at the story of Cosme's wrongs, told with the dramatic force of a heathen logician, and the cry of faith of the worshipper at the shrine of motherhood.

'*Ave Maria Sanctissima*,' she would respond, 'give this man his right.' And Cosme Rul would depart, uplifted and inspired, as though her words were a benison from on high.

In the brief moments of their meeting Carmen unconsciously ceased to class him with the *peons* or any grade of men which she knew. Yet his personality remained distinctly that of an inferior whom she might rightfully command, and whose homage was naturally her due, and which at the moment it was rendered woke no emotion either of pleasure or resentment. But in his absence her thoughts were complex—

tormenting. She once had seen a statue of the flying Mercury, and it seemed to symbolise the swiftness and keen subtilty of Cosme Rul. She began to think of him with a kind of dazed wonder. Would that bodily energy and strength, that overmastering passion for justice, that insensibility to the chances of defeat, create a second Guatemotzin or Juarez, or would it hurry an obscure *peon* to a murderer's grave? An intense curiosity and partizanship soon took possession of her mind. The fate of Pedro Ortiz became of moment only as a determining factor in the development of the future of Cosme Rul.

Carmen never actually formulated such thoughts as these, but scattered, dim as they were, they actuated every word she spoke, every movement she made, and most strongly when, as soon happened, the hacienda was overrun by the *rurales* returning from their fruitless quests. Cosme, she knew, was near at hand, with the purpose of tracking his enemy to his lair in a portion of the country far remote from that which the police had explored. But it was possible that a word, a look, might send them upon his track. It became a burning question to Carmen how best she might aid the purpose of the *peon*,

by subtle suggestions to the *rurales*, which should leave him free. It was not fear for his life that influenced her. She was not conscious that it mattered to her whether he lived or died. But that he should not be baulked in his vengeance mattered much. It appeared to her that the only way in which Cosme Rul could demonstrate his true relation to Pedro Ortiz, and justify in the minds of men, and the law, the attack upon Norberto, was to accomplish his vengeance with his own hand. Dimly, confusedly, she realised that, on that cast, the man would rise or fall—to himself, to the world.

He had briefly told her where he should, sooner or later, find his enemy. Where he should run him to earth, as the hound runs the fox, to what wilds they would penetrate, and what clues he should follow. She had listened to him with that fascination which strong yet powerless natures feel in association with one who has some real and urgent grief upon which to concentrate the powers that create but vague discontent within themselves. How gladly would Carmen have seized the right to avenge her own unhappiness! She envied this man the privilege of action, the solace of revenge.

The rainy season, which had been interrupted by a period of drought, recommenced with fury. Every afternoon, and sometimes at night, the clouds poured down a deluge which threatened to destroy the crops on the foothills and in the valley. The young lambs were drowned, and the shepherds and *vaqueros* were drenched, so they had to go about in their *jorongos*, or with tent-like coverings of woven grass. Every outdoor occupation was at a standstill or, in spite of the morning sunshine, became a martyrdom. The *rurales* sulked in the corridors, or unwillingly set out upon some fresh raid from which they returned disgusted. The water-soaked garden gave no echo at midnight, and the Senora thought it but natural that Carmen should grow pale. Though her lover could scarcely be expected to dare the uncertainties of the night, why should he not venture forth by day? The exigencies of the times might well excuse a breach of etiquette. But Norberto did not appear, and Carmen's eyes began to shine feverishly beneath her black lashes, and when her face was not deadly white a spot of burning red glowed in each cheek. Yet when the girl was urged to end the uncertainty that held her lover from venturing to

enter Tlaltelzingo she impatiently refused. The family were as one in resenting a hesitation which seemed so childish and unreasonable.

Meanwhile the thought of Norberto Sanchez, or of marriage, was the last to enter the mind of Carmen. It was full of visions of one who she knew was leading the life of a wild beast in the wild mountains. Heedless of tempest, tracking his prey into deep ravines, barring him from caves where he might find shelter or from hamlets where he might buy bread. Carmen knew that the pursued and the pursuer never rested. She followed them in fancy over the slippery face of the mountains, across torrents that leaped from precipice to precipice on their furious way to the sea. She saw them cowering (the older man with blanched face and starting eyes, the younger, lithe and fierce as the mountain tiger) under the lush grass of valleys, or the rushes of swamps. Vision after vision passed before her mental sight, and impressed kaleidoscopic horrors upon her brain, and through all ran the consciousness that her baleful influence upon the *peon* had nerved him to his task. Because he supposed she loved Norberto Sanchez, he had possessed himself of the

arms of the young hacendado, believing she had transmitted to them some magic power. She herself was not free from the superstition regarding such influence. And what if his trust should be in vain? What if her contempt had cast a baleful spell upon the arms of Sanchez? What if the blood of Cosme Rul was to be upon her head?

In the daytime her senses were alert to every movement of the people around her and to every rumour brought by the various comers from the mountains or the valley. By night sleep forsook her, and she stood at her window listening to the uncertain voices of the solitude until driven to her bed by sheer failure of physical strength; and the surging in her ears of what seemed the sound of waters and rushing winds, mingled with the shouts of contending men.

None around her guessed the rapid wasting of her nervous strength or this secret excitement which found vent in irritable disclaimer when Norberto Sanchez was blamed. The moon entered its third quarter, and there was a cessation of rain, when it was expected that his visits would be resumed. Carmen herself feared that his unworthy dread of encountering bandits might have passed and

that he would indeed present himself, but he declined the risk, excusing himself in long and frequent letters. Carmen disdained to feign pique, but openly declared that she would no longer tolerate the idea of marriage with him.

The Senora said she was acting like a spoiled child, and found a thousand excuses for Norberto, not guessing that since the robbery he had not approached her granddaughter. Fernando could understand the matter as little, and Don Isidor, suspecting some lovers' quarrel, while advising patience, was resolved to see Norberto and warn him not to trifle with the pride of a Valdivia by yielding to a prudence or pique which might well have been mistaken for cowardice had not his earlier action (his supposed visits) disproved it. The Padre Nicanor shook his head, and said that whatever was amiss in the condition of Carmen had been brought about by her failure to attend to her religious duties, for though she was much in the church at this time she never went to him for confession.

This time that seemed so long was in reality but a few days, but they soon resolved themselves for Carmen into periods of dreary waiting, or its most exquisite torture. What was happening there in the wilds? What

was to be the result? When would this horrible silence be broken? When would her complicity—it seemed no less—in the inevitable tragedy be declared?

She burned with fever or froze with alternate chill. The face and form of Cosme Rul gradually became as though photographed upon her brain. Waking or sleeping, if she ever slept, it became inseparable from her, seared upon her consciousness as though with a branding-iron. At times she seemed to see him weltering in his blood, and a horrible faintness overcame her. At others the grim spectre of Pedro Ortiz rose before her and she strove in vain to turn away—she, the accomplice, nay, the very author of his death.

It may be said that the entire situation was based upon sentiment as false as it was dangerous, and outside the pale of any healthy mind. Granted. But the warp and woof of exceptional beings, such as Carmen Valdivia, contain threads not found in the texture of ordinary minds. The golden thread of the most precious quality may be incongruously laid, and bring discordance into the most exquisite design. This was doubtless the case in the mental and moral fabric of the nature of Carmen.

Fortunately for her sanity, perhaps, this suspense was not long continued. One starlit night, as she lay upon her bed, listening with tense ear and brain, she heard the creaking of a twig, a movement that might have been taken for the flutter of a bird by any other. But Carmen knew it for what it was—the footfall of Cosme Rul. He stood beneath her window, and for a moment looked at her hungrily with eyes that burned from sunken sockets, and then in a low, unimpassioned voice told quite simply the tale that in some inexplicable way relaxed the strained fibres of her being and made her once again capable of controlling the workings of her mind.

Pedro Ortiz was dead. Yes. He, Cosme Rul, had killed him. And he—himself? Ah, yes, he had a trifling wound; a ball through the fleshy part of his arm. Nothing, nothing.

Carmen shook, and there was a painful contraction in her breast as her eyes fell upon the darkest stain among the many on his jacket. Rul wore what had once been the finery of a *vaquero*, but the yellow leather was brown and the silver embroidery scarcely distinguishable. Even his red *faja*, or belt, and his wide sombrero were discoloured to blackness. In the half light he seemed to

be clad in the riding garb of a gentleman. But Carmen knew him to be in the sorriest plight of a drenched and tattered *peon*.

Rul said nothing of the hardships he had undergone, nor of the terrible exposure to rain and tempest. These had been to him as nothing, but of late Pedro Ortiz, in desperation, had resolved to throw himself into the power of the *rurales*, and had drawn nearer and nearer their lines, so that there had been to Cosme Rul the imminent danger of at once falling into their hands and losing his enemy. Carmen listened breathlessly as he told of the cunning with which he had circumvented the movements of Ortiz. Her vision of the haunted man and the tiger had been one of literal significance. The tiger had often believed himself too slow and too obtuse for his alert and agile prey, yet he had followed, followed, followed, never allowing himself sleep or rest, and suddenly, unexpectedly, had beheld his enemy face to face.

Cosme paused, as though his hearer had but to guess what followed. 'Yes, yes, you met,' ejaculated Carmen; 'and then?'

'The sun was in his eyes. He and the two men with him—one was that Pancho Mier they call "Diablo"—were turning the curve

of the mountain that overhangs the great gorge of Mal-Paso—the *niña* has heard of it, and that the precipice falls a sheer thousand feet. They were fools to attempt the descent of the mountain by that narrow path, though it is true only in one spot where I met them is it bordered by cliffs of solid rock. Anywhere but at that point there might be escape. But think, *Niña*, how just is God! Upon their left hand was the gorge and upon their right the cliffs, and the road so narrow that a horse could not turn upon it.'

'But the road was the same for you,' ejaculated Carmen, 'and they were three to one.'

'But the sun was in their eyes,' cried Rul; 'the sun was in their eyes. Yet, for all that, they saw me as soon as I did them. God! Pedro Ortiz knew me though he could have seen but a black mass. He knew he was lost. Yet if he had pressed on, *Caramba!* my horse was spent; but in an instant he plunged forward. It must be that Pedro had half turned to sight me better. The two horses struck together, fire flew, a bullet from Pedro's pistol hit me. Then he was gone. Ay, the scream as his horse and the man upon him went over the brink, and so crashing down!'

‘Down!’ echoed Carmen, with white lips.

‘It had rained in the night; the ground slipped beneath his horse’s feet,’ explained Cosme, ‘as my first shot touched him. But the others. Ah, the others! They were upon me as soon as Pedro. Ay, *Niña*, the shouts, the oaths, the shrieks of men and horses! Never were such sounds before upon the mountain-side. But it was over before one could feel wounds or blows. I would not have killed the fools, but they forced me. Ay, *Niña*, what a horrible silence is upon the mountain in the early morning when one looks into dead men’s faces. Ah!’

Carmen shuddered. ‘And then?’ she said.

‘I lay among the horses, panting, panting, and when the sun had risen higher, and there was shadow from the cliff, I went and peered down into the gorge. He was lying there far below, with his horse upon him. I could see even from that height that he was dead. But I clambered down, I touched him, I beheld him as I had my mother, and I was satisfied.’

Carmen crossed herself, and muttered an *ave*. Cosme went on, ‘The shot was in his heart. Ay, *Niña*, I knew those pistols could not fail.’

‘It was as God willed,’ commented Carmen.

The end and not the means predominated so strongly in the mind of Rul that Carmen could elicit no further particulars of one of the most sanguinary conflicts ever waged in the land of passion and vengeance; so she never learned (what the *rurales* in their investigations adduced) the tremendous effort he must have put forth. Plainly the most overwhelming nervous force must have aided his physical strength, for his opponents were of giant proportions compared with his own, and experts in the use of weapons.

He had the air of a man who had slain a wild beast which had broken into his fold and which was now unworthy of a second thought. He had himself given notice to the police where the carrion was to be found, having at nightfall encountered a small force, who had not recognised him until he had told his tale, and then in their admiration and surprise they had hesitated to arrest him.

Availing himself of the right he had acquired by the ethics of blood-feuds, he had possessed himself of the arms of his vanquished foe.

‘Pedrito shall have them,’ he said, speaking with an instinct of justice towards the son of

the dead man. 'The *chiquillo* has the eyes of our mother, and I love him well. These pistols of Don Norberto's,' he added, 'have done their work well, *Niña*. I knew they would. Still, I hate the sight of them. They call me *ladron*. If they belonged to any man but the one you love, *Niña*, I would destroy them. Yet I took them for a just purpose; why should I hate them?'

Carmen smiled sardonically.

'The body of Pedro will be found in the morning,' continued Cosme, 'with those of the other bandits. All the world knows Pancho Mier, *el diablo*, and will know that only a *hombre de bien* would have killed them. The band is left without leaders. The road is cleared for Don Norberto; he will thank me. The *Niña* loves him, therefore he must be a noble cavalier, yet he has hunted me almost to the death. But now he will know, now he will understand.'

Carmen murmured a word that Cosme did not hear.

He went on dreamily, as though repeating arguments he had rehearsed a thousand times. 'He himself, or Don Fernando, or any man would have seized the pistols, as he could. One must avenge a mother, cost what it will.

Oh, yes, when they bring the body of Pedro in he will understand, he will forgive.'

'Never!' cried Carmen, impetuously. 'He is a coward and incapable of a generous thought. I despise—I hate him.'

The young *peon* threw back his head and the starlight shone full upon his face. Such expressions of wonder, joy, hatred, love passed over it, that the girl recoiled in dismay. Then he clasped his hands upon his brow as though he had received a staggering blow.

'They told me you had always loved each other,' he said in husky tones. 'You are to marry, you are to marry.'

Carmen was suddenly overcome with that conviction which she had held without realising its significance—that of his having associated the thought of her with every plan and act of his vengeance. Now she had destroyed the illusion by which he had held her sacred—sacred to Norberto Sanchez—that illusion that had been the hacendado's protection as well as her own. It was as though a barrier had suddenly fallen and she instinctively cowered.

'Go! go!' she whispered presently; 'take back the pistols to Norberto Sanchez. He is a cavalier. He will understand. He will pardon—he must—he shall!'

‘It is all one to me,’ cried the man, violently, ‘but if he will not, I will not yield my life lightly, except it be for you, *Niña!* The day you ask it—if it is but to throw it away—it shall be yours.’

‘I need no champion,’ she answered with a forced laugh. Then she added irrelevantly, passionately, ‘My family can never force me to marry Norberto Sanchez. That day is past.’

She stopped appalled. What had she said? Was she mad? The *peon's* eyes shone with a glitter that scintillated through the gloom. A cold sweat broke out upon her. With an exclamation of terror she hastily closed the cedar shutters and listened intently as he strode almost noiselessly across the sward. But she did not shut out terror as she shut out the night. It clutched her heart and remained with her. Yet she could give it no name. The unimaginable—the unnameable—threatened her.

CHAPTER X

WITHIN twenty-four hours the hacienda was overrun by soldiery and police, who were seeking the daring *peon* and suspected bandit who, upon his own account, and in the avenging of a mere private quarrel, had hunted to the death the outlaws who had for months mocked their most determined efforts. After giving information of the deed, Cosme Rul had disappeared as suddenly as he had come, though in that communication he had given no intimation that he knew himself to be under the ban of the law.

The officer in command of the *rurales*, or mounted police, expressed some surprise that the man was not to be found in his hut.

‘These ignorant dogs,’ said he, ‘can never be brought to know that they are forbidden to tear each other without authority, and after one, more fierce and cunning than his fellow, has brought down his quarry he usually

slinks away to his home and makes the work of justice easy.'

But whether or no Cosme Rul had reflected that the law would ask an accounting of him, he did not present himself to give it. Nor, in spite of the utmost diligence, was any trace of him discovered, though almost every person in the village was subjected to a more or less searching inquisition.

Carmen could not believe that Selsa, the sister, was as ignorant of Cosme's whereabouts as she protested she was. The girl had a look in her eyes, such as she had seen in her own, as she stood at her mirror, when her maid reported the arrival of the police with their fresh orders to shoot Cosme Rul at sight, for Don Norberto had at length remembered that it was to him that he had given over the pistols, and that he was the actual leader of the band that had despoiled him.

'Don Norberto's memory has been wonderfully freshened,' said Carmen, with a sarcasm that was lost on her hearer, 'by the death of Pedro Ortiz.'

'Without doubt, *Niña*,' answered the girl, 'and Juan, the *mozo*, goes so far as to say Cosme was alone when he and Don Norberto were stopped on the road. But that, of course,

could not be, for the Senor and Juan were both armed, and it would have been impossible for one man to rob them.'

But this idea had evidently penetrated the minds of the village folk, and although Pedro Ortiz was for a few hours remembered with that sympathy and respect that death creates for the brave, however despicable their other qualities have been, Cosme became a hero, and there was open remonstrance against the proclamation forbidding anyone to afford him shelter. Even the *rurales*—perhaps because most of them had been bandits themselves and could appreciate the sleuth-like cunning and determination with which he had hunted Pedro Ortiz down—muttered among themselves that it was a pity to shoot a man who would make so good a soldier.

Carmen was surprised to find that neither his friends—those who credited him with accomplishing a due act of vengeance, or those who believed he had committed a mere vulgar crime, the outcome of a disagreement among partners—were for a moment inclined to consider him other than a desperado. The fact that Cosme Rul had ridden the highways of their terror was sufficient, in the minds of the villagers, to condone his supposed share in the robbery of

Norberto Sanchez, and the *rurales* secretly applauded the act, yet resented it strongly as a reflection upon their own incapacity. This was especially the case with the officers, and the rage occasioned by the derision of which they were the objects, made it certain that they would, should he be arrested, immediately shoot him—as they were empowered to do—unless the hacendados should make special efforts in his behalf.

Fernando was quite willing to do so, being inclined to believe they had to deal with a case of *vendetta*, which was quite different in the ordinary mind to one of brigandage. Norberto Sanchez, however, was obdurate. His influence was the only one that might be employed with certain effect. Still the villagers illogically importuned Don Isidor to interfere, and there was a general feeling of relief when he one day mounted his horse and, followed by his servant, set out upon the road to Cruz-Roja.

‘*Caramba !*’ said the elders with admiration. ‘We shall see that a single word from Tlaltelzingo will be enough, and Don Isidor will know how to speak it.’

Don Isidor, however, did not continue long on the road to Cruz-Roja, but, making a *détour*, entered upon that which led to Santa-Trinita.

A troop of *rurales* was quartered there by the special request of its owner, though it was thought extremely unlikely that Cosme Rul would venture within its bounds. As Don Isidor reached the precipitous descent to the valley in which the house lay, he could see the groups of women that follow the camp gathered upon the plain outside the wide gateway. They were grinding corn upon the *metatés* or cooking savoury messes over *braseros* of ruddy charcoal. The men were for the most part within the court. One, who was evidently a stranger, rode slowly down a *vereda* or bridle-path. He lifted his hat with the *ranchero's* studied politeness as he passed the women. Two or three of them, with whom he exchanged greetings, looked after him with surprise. The *mozo* who rode behind Don Isidor uttered an exclamation, and the gentleman himself spurred his horse to a gallop.

Meanwhile Norberto Sanchez, with a letter in his hand, stood conversing with the captain of the troop, who was about to join him at his midday breakfast.

‘This is strange, Gonzales,’ he said. ‘From this letter I am almost certain that the assassin, Cosme Rul, has been seen at Tlaltelzingo.’

‘Assassin, Senor?’ queried the captain, with a

laugh. 'Would you call a man an assassin who shoots down a tiger on the highway? And what was this Pedro Ortiz but a bloodthirsty tiger? You have yourself avowed that you would not venture to leave your doors while he lived. Even if this Cosme Rul was with him upon the night you were robbed, he will be harmless enough now that his chief is dead.'

'She wants me to suffer him to join the *rurales*,' mused Norberto, unwittingly giving the clue to the identity of his correspondent, and the captain laughed again.

'What! Cosme Rul! The easiest thing in the world to arrange,' said he. 'We have only to proclaim that he will be received, for him to present himself at once, and you, Senor, will have pleased a lady by your generous act and rid yourself of any possible chance of trouble from this fellow, who, whether he is a bandit or no, will make a first-class *rural*.'

Norberto scowled. 'Damn him!' he replied. 'No. Let him die for the *ladron* that he is. As to his mother, she was—'

He stopped with the word on his lips, and looked up gapingly, actually petrified, as the man of whom he had been speaking rode into the midst of the soldiers and, with perfect non-chalance, approaching the group of gentlemen,

dismounted, pulled off his hat and begged leave to speak.

Norberto's tongue actually clove to the roof of his mouth. The officer did not observe his perturbation, and supposing the newcomer to be a messenger from some distant hacienda, withdrew a step and so did not hear what was said. But presently he saw that the *peon* was making rapid and profound excuses, and that the face of the hacendado grew black with rage. But all passed so rapidly that it did not occur to him that he might have any special interest in the matter until he saw the *peon* unbuckle his belt, and placing it, with the pistols in its holsters, in the hands of Norberto spring into his saddle.

'*Por Dios !* this is our man,' cried the officer, and shouting an order, drew his sword. But his men were unprepared, or perhaps struck motionless by the daring of the *peon*, for they parted right and left, and Cosme had reached the archway when Norberto raised one of the pistols, which, in bravado or blind confidence, had been given into his hands loaded, and fired. The ball passed through the high peaked hat of the rider, who, quick as a flash, turned his horse, and his glance seeming like a lightning bolt to single out his foe, he bore down

upon the cowering hacendado, riding over the officer, who had drawn his sword, as though he were a dry stalk upon the highway. Reining back his excited steed upon its haunches, the athletic man held it a moment struggling and pawing above the head of Norberto. Then letting it drop its hoofs to the stones with a thud, he reached forward and grasped the undischarged pistol, and, with a gesture of contempt, fired it into the air, and galloping through the shouting and bewildered throng, would have made good his escape, but that he came full upon Don Isidor and his man in the doorway. The momentary check to his progress gave opportunity for a dozen hands to seize and drag him from his horse.

There was some talk of despatching such a desperate criminal on the spot, and but for Don Isidor Norberto would have gained his will. Farther than this the elder gentleman would make no plea for the rights of Tlaltelzingo, and after the breakfast, which the gentlemen took amicably together, the captive, hungry and sullen, was lashed on a horse, and in the midst of the triumphant *rurales* borne off in the direction of Cruz-Roja.

Conflicting accounts of the matter reached Tlaltelzingo in a few hours. First it was said that Cosme Rul had attacked and killed the

young hacendado. Then that Cosme himself had been killed by Don Isidor, who for the first time in his life held for a few minutes a reputation for dashing gallantry. Then something nearer the truth was told, that Norberto had chastised the outlaw who had entered his house to defy and insult him. No one but Carmen guessed the purpose with which Rul had really gone, and she bitterly reproached herself for having urged him to risk his life in testing the honour and generosity of a man she had already believed incapable of both. Moreover, she was overcome with mortification at the failure of her own efforts and the thought that they had perhaps only added to the certainty of Cosme Rul's destruction.

The *rurales* at Tlaltelzingo having no further business there rode away crestfallen, leaving the village folk running like ants from hut to hut, and uttering wild lamentations and entreaties to Don Fernando to hasten to Cruz-Roja and intercede for the life of his *peon*. Carmen did the same but Fernando was inert, and the Senora Valdivia said it would actually be going against the will of the Blessed Virgin, and that as for the villagers they had never had any friendship for Cosme Rul till they had thought him a *ladron*, which was true enough.

‘He is the only man on the hacienda worthy of a thought,’ cried Carmen. ‘He redeems a vow and rids the road of miscreants at the same time, and you suffer him to lose his life for it. It is murder, nothing less.’

‘*Caramba!*’ retorted Fernando, ‘I have accused the man of nothing. It is Sanchez to whom you should appeal with your hysterical reasonings. Perhaps he would see the force of them. Of course he would only be too happy to grant your caprices.’

‘You taunt me with his indifference, or him with his cowardice,’ she cried passionately. ‘He will show himself doubly a coward if he comes to me now that the roads are clear of the one man who made them terrible to him.’

‘What nonsense women talk,’ retorted Fernando, with an air of calm superiority. ‘This fellow may have actually taken the pistols, but even when Pedro was on the road the two did not suffice to keep Norberto at home of moonlight nights, as you know well enough.’

Carmen opened her mouth to speak, and then turned suddenly away while Fernando laughed. ‘Ah, *hermana mia!*’ he exclaimed, ‘I know you are a coquette and I love you the better for it, and so does Norberto, but he has been punishing

your teasing and you must be more reasonable in the future.'

'You are mistaken, Norberto Sanchez cares nothing for me,' replied Carmen, emphatically.

'It is too late for such shilly-shallying,' cried Fernando, angrily. 'A Valdivia may neither trifle nor be trifled with. I have seen Norberto Sanchez too often at your window to permit you to reject him at last.'

He turned away impatiently, and Carmen rushed to her room and paced it liked an enraged tigress; but Norberto or marriage held her thoughts but a moment. Her mind was filled with matters of life or death.

The execution of a highway robber, especially if he has a reputation for desperate deeds, usually follows quickly upon his arrest. Carmen wondered that Cosme Rul had been spared to leave Santa-Trinita, but surely upon his arrival at Cruz-Roja his end would come. The man who had filled her secret mind for weeks with a phantasma of changeful dreams, now perplexing, now lurid, now inspiring, would be shot to death in the name of justice to gratify a coward and give a morning's excitement to the *plebe* of the town. Carmen did not understand the passion of rage and despair that possessed her, yet beat her breast with her hands like

helpless winged things beat the air yet make no progress against a storm.

At length she heard a timid knock upon the door, and became conscious that it had sounded once or twice before.

She instinctively passed her hands over her face to press out the marks of her suffering. 'Come in, come in,' she presently said huskily.

Her door was slowly pushed open, and Selsa, that sister of Cosme's who had angered and bewildered her all day by haunting the house, listening for news with great eyes shining out of the *reboso* with which she covered her dishevelled hair and her ragged *camisa*, came stealthily in.

Carmen stood in the middle of the room and looked at the girl inquiringly. Why was she there? The girl was the same as any other ragged creature on the place to her. What did she want?

The visitor carefully closed the door and placed her back against it. She even leaned wearily, as though she was faint. Carmen realised that she was suffering though her eyes were tearless, but they had lost that mingling of hope and defiance that they had expressed as the *rurales* ransacked the village, and Carmen suddenly felt that the girl had come to her, through some

inexplicable instinct, to unburden herself of some secret or charge which she could no longer endure.

‘See, *Niña*, they are here,’ she presently said, throwing aside the *reboso* that covered her. ‘I have carried them all day and they never suspected,’ and across her breast Carmen saw strapped a pair of pistols. With trembling fingers she unbuckled the belt and laid it and the weapons at Carmen’s feet.

‘*Niña, Niña*,’ she said brokenly, ‘help me, help me!’

‘These are not Don Norberto’s pistols; why do you bring them to me?’ asked Carmen, in confusion.

The girl began to cry piteously. ‘Oh, *Niña*, they were Pedro’s. My poor Cosme would not take them with him because he feared he might be angered and kill Don Norberto. He bade me hide them and keep them safe for Pedrito. All day long I have carried them in my bosom lest the soldiers should find them. See where they have bruised me,’ and she bared her young breast and showed the livid marks.

‘You have been faithful,’ said Carmen, in a low voice, as she stooped and lifted the pistols. She knew what an enviable possession they were in the eyes of the *plebé*, and understood the sentiment that had destined those tools of the father’s calling to be the heritage of his infant

son. She was accustomed to handle firearms, and unconsciously noticed the value and beauty of those. They would have been rich booty for the police.

‘Why did you bring them to me?’ she again asked suspiciously. Had Cosme boasted of the access he had had to her presence?

‘The *Niña* knows how small the hut is,’ answered the girl, in a tone of expostulation. ‘If I should hide them there even the very children would find them, and to carry them always under my *reboso* is not possible.’

‘No,’ mused Carmen, ‘and it is just that the last wish of a man should be respected. The eyes of the girl were upon her, and she spoke with resolute calmness. ‘But this Pedrito,’ she added, ‘I must see him. You shall bring him to me when—when—the other is dead.’

‘*Ave Maria Sanctisima, ora pro nobis,*’ ejaculated the girl, crossing herself, ‘the Senorita is kind, and I will bring Pedrito to see her after I know that Cosme is dead. Poor Cosme! Oh, Cosme! Cosme!’ She murmured over and over her brother’s name, already accepting with fatalistic resignation the certainty of his doom, and catching at the vague offer of help conveyed by Carmen in the request that the child might be brought to her.

‘I must go home now,’ she presently said, uneasy under the strange gaze of her mistress, and actuated by the maternal instinct that had been so early stirred within her. ‘The children were crying when I came, little Pedro most of all, for I was not able to grind the corn to-day for the *atole* or *tortillas*.’

‘And you?’ said Carmen. ‘You cannot be hungry; no one is suffered to be hungry at Tlaltelzingo, yet you are worn to a shadow.’ She had never realised before how young the children of the poor take the burdens of life upon them. She could have understood an outburst of sorrow, but it seemed incredible that this child had been bearing and hiding crushing anxieties through all the time of her brother’s absence, and had never complained. She laid her arm over the girl’s neck, then turned hastily away and placed the pistols within a cedar chest.

‘Nothing would matter if Cosme could live,’ said Selsa. She had accepted the caress almost as though it were a benediction. ‘Can the *Niña* do nothing? But, oh, if he is already dead!’

‘Hush! hush!’ ejaculated Carmen, almost fiercely, turning from the chest; ‘you know I can do nothing. Only the Holy Virgin can help him, and you stand there like a raven croaking

of death. See, here is money. Go, buy candles for the altar of the Virgin of the Refugio. Make a vow. Promise what you will and I will pay it. Fools that we are to think he is already dead. He will not allow himself to be crushed like a worm under a man's heel. With the help of the saints he may still be saved. Go! Why do you stare?'

In truth the girl, unused to the excitement of fervent natures, looked at her in amaze as the young lady filled her hands with coins; but the suggestion was one which filled her with hope and enthusiasm, and, invoking blessings upon her mistress, she hastened away.

That night the altar of the little church blazed with lights, and even the priest did not ask where the money came from to buy them. Even if it had been provided by Cosme Rul himself, and was the booty from some highway robbery, he saw no reason that the Church should not directly profit from it, and if indirectly the soul of the man should be benefited, so much the better.

There were those that surmised that Pedro Ortiz might have been the source from which the funds had reached Cosme's hands, and thereafter Selsa's, but no one suggested the propriety of offering a prayer for him. For Cosme,

however, the enthusiasm rapidly grew, and there was scarce a villager who failed to visit the church that night and say an *ave* or Hail, Mary ! for him. There was a confused idea among them that he was about to become a saint or a martyr, and it would have been difficult for anyone to tell whether they were celebrating a funeral or a *fiesta*. Certain it is that few in Tlaltelzingo slept that night.

CHAPTER XI

AFTER Selsa left her, Carmen stood for some minutes lost in thought, and then, with feverish haste, made her toilet for the evening meal. Upon her return from the city, partly to please her brother, partly to indulge her own youthful vanity, she had continued the custom, adopted at her aunt's, of arraying herself in some dainty confection of silk and lace. Upon this evening, without giving any thought to her choice, she donned a costume that enhanced the beauty of her creamy skin and luminous black eyes, and which, without giving her colour, relieved the pallor which would otherwise have betrayed her agitation.

To still further disguise it, she entered the supper-room humming the air of a favourite *danza*, which died on her lips as she perceived Norberto Sanchez. He was talking with an affectation of ease which at once betrayed his embarrassment, and his greetings were more effusive than the perfect composure of good

breeding would have permitted. Carmen attributed this to his consciousness of the cowardice that had kept him from her since his midnight adventure, and also to the fact that he had not replied to the note she had addressed to him upon behalf of the *peon*.

In truth, the attempted shooting of the man for whom she had pleaded, upon which Don Isidor had commented as being an indignity offered to Tlaltelzingo, which not only Carmen, but the entire family, might well resent, was both the cause of his uneasiness and of his visit.

Don Isidor had advised him to defer it, but Norberto thought it prudent to present his own version of the matter before any reliable account should reach her. He even hoped that anything she might have heard might have thrown some glamour of heroism over his conduct, which it might be possible for him to strengthen.

As the meal, which was presently announced, proceeded, he talked freely and lightly of the occurrence. He excused his impetuosity in firing upon the man when his back was turned, on the plea that he could not behold with patience the outlaw who had so long terrorised the neighbourhood, and had prevented him from fulfilling his most sacred obligations.

He threw a languishing glance upon Carmen,

which she received coldly, as she said, 'Can it be possible you have feared this *peon*, of whom you now speak so contemptuously?'

'Feared?' answered Norberto, indignantly. 'I know not the meaning of the word. But you must admit it would have been the height of folly for me to have exposed myself to a second attack from this fellow, whom I recognised from the first as the chief of the band that wrested my pistols from me.'

Carmen looked at the young man with an enigmatical smile. He flushed and added confusedly, 'I wished to spare him. My foolish softheartedness made me desirous of saving this young *peon* and giving him a chance of becoming an honest man. I preferred to accuse Pedro Ortiz, a man already condemned.'

'Ah! you have, indeed, a tender heart, Norberto,' interposed the Senora. 'We shall not forget your consideration for the honour of Tlaltelzingo.'

'No,' commented Carmen, though her glance betrayed the little belief she had in his fine sentiments or his veracity. Yet her mind dwelt on what he had said. It was late, but if he chose he might still save the life of Cosme Rul. He pretended to be zealous for the honour of Tlaltelzingo. Was that a covert invitation to

her to renew the request in person that she had already made by letter, and which had been so vigorously rejected? She turned to him resolutely.

‘Remember,’ she said in a low, thrilling voice, ‘what we saw at the river. Yet you set a price upon his head because he played you a foolish trick that he might obtain the means to avenge himself. But now forgive it—’

‘A trick!’ exclaimed Norberto, hotly, ‘the trick of a bandit. Tlaltelzingo will be well rid of such a fellow. The roads would never be safe if he were to escape.’

‘*Por Dios*, Norberto!’ cried Fernando, ‘you talk as though your caution had indeed made a coward of you. If so the shadows of the night must have deceived me.’ He looked from the young man to Carmen and laughed meaningly.

Norberto laughed also, and tossed off a glass of wine, evidently not averse to accepting Fernando’s implied belief in his daring in the combats of love. Carmen felt that her uncle’s eyes rested upon her questioningly, and suddenly she felt as though a great gulf had opened before her. For the first time she realised that for her own sake, as well as the *peon’s* safety, it behoved her to dissemble. Quick as the thought she turned towards him, smiling saucily and

uttering a bantering speech, thus checking Don Isidor's evident intention of putting a direct question.

A moment's reflection apparently convinced him that to do so would be unwise, and the supper proceeded amid a general conversation in which Carmen bore an animated part. To her own ears her voice rang false and hollow, but Norberto was enchanted with the flow of wit and laughter apparently evoked by his presence. Never had he known the young girl so charming, so gracious. Could he but speak to her in private that night!

As they rose from the table he remembered that as he had ridden up to the hacienda with Don Isidor they had noticed that the church was lighted. It was the festival of a favourite saint, and it occurred to Norberto, who was, after his manner devout, and attached a superstitious credence in the efficacy of certain observances; that the interposition of the Patroness of Tlaltelzingo in the decision of his suit could not fail to be favourable to his desires. Surely that blessed saint would realise the importance of uniting the fortunes of Tlaltelzingo and Santa-Trinita, and would bring to an end the foolish hesitation of Carmen.

To invoke her aid publicly seemed to him an

inspiration, and he at once proposed that all present should attend the service. Fernando demurred, and Don Isidor shrugged his shoulders. Such night festivals were usually left to the *plebe*, but the Senora Rodriguez agreed with alacrity to the pious motion of their guest. Carmen assented with actual gratitude, with a vague but fanatical conviction that a miracle would be worked on behalf of Cosme Rul when such incongruous elements were being brought together at the service she had caused to be dedicated to his deliverance.

In the interval between the supper and the time they were to go to the church she sat at the piano and played with the abandon and ease that is so common with people of her race. Their music is the outcome of emotion and passion rather than of intellect, and moves alike the hearer and the producer. Unconsciously she struck those minor chords in which are rendered folk-songs of love and suffering, and, after listening with ill-disguised impatience, Norberto cried,—

‘Let us be gay, Carmencita. Play us a love song from an opera, or a wedding march. Those minor strains remind me of things that I would forget when I am with you.’

‘Carmen has been gloomy of late,’ interposed

the Senora, slyly, 'but doubtless the cure is not far to seek.'

Carmen ended the music abruptly, and rising, threw a dark *reboso* over her light dress.

'Come,' she said to Norberto, sharply, 'this must be ended.'

She was seemingly in an irritable mood, and passed abruptly from the room, leaving those who should have preceded her to follow.

'*Dios de mi vida*,' murmured the Senora as she took Norberto's proffered arm. 'It is impossible to understand the young people of this day. Carmencita is unhappy. But why? For you have returned. What would she have?'

'What, indeed?' asked Norberto, complacently. 'Doubtless the fear that my life has been in danger has excited her nerves, and when that fellow Cosme Rul is finally settled she will regain control over them. Meanwhile, I am not offended that she so far misunderstands her own mind that she actually begged me to induce the *rurales* to accept him among them—in fact, to interfere to save his life. His last attack upon me has, of course, shown her how foolish that would have been.'

'Carmen is obstinate,' replied the Senora, 'and requires careful handling. You know, a

girl likes to claim power over the man who professes to love her.'

'And no one can be more yielding than I,' cried Norberto, gaily. 'Ah! would that the lovely Carmencita would ask for my life, I would not refuse it.'

The Senora laughed.

'You are a true lover,' she whispered, 'and make me long to be young again.'

But they had crossed the *patio* and were at the door of the church, which was crowded to suffocation, and for the few moments in which they were unrecognised it seemed that they would be unable to enter. Presently, however, the whisper went round that the Senores had come, and way was made for them to the altar, which was decorated with a profusion of paper flowers and guttering tallow candles, above which a tawdry figure of the Virgin stood simpering inanely, while the people prayed and wept below it. The body of the church was crowded with worshippers, whose devotion had risen to feverish earnestness as the night advanced. Carmen looked upon them with an intense pity and gratitude. Like her companions, she had witnessed such scenes again and again with indifference, but this night the tawny women on their knees, with wide-eyed

children clinging to their ragged skirts, the lean, muscular men, clasping their reed-woven hats against their naked breasts, and lifting their heavy eyes to the smiling Virgin as they muttered their prayers, were significant to her of the world's poverty and helplessness crying for justice, as Cosme Rul, with the burden of his dead mother in his arms, had done. Were all alike to find only death in reply?

‘Oh, God! is there no help on earth or in heaven? Is there none who will be merciful?’

She perceived Selsa kneeling on the darkest side of the main altar, with a child leaning against her fast asleep; another was striving to tell its beads, but nodded and gasped. Norberto, who desired to kneel by Carmen, pushed the young mourner unceremoniously aside. He had gathered from the ejaculations around him what the purpose of the devotion was, and was angered and confused, but had no intention of abandoning the design with which he had come. He was, indeed, rather the more inclined to persist as he noted the dark glances that were cast upon him. Undoubtedly, he thought, these *animales* had heard of the summary manner with which he had dealt with their comrade, and resented it.

As he and Carmen knelt together before the

altar, those nearest drew back till they were virtually alone, so that with a cautious dropping of his voice Norberto could address her with little fear of being overheard. Rapidly he poured into her ear that tale he had so often told before, and even endeavoured to seize her hand beneath the cover of her *reboso*.

‘*Ave Maria Sanctisima!* Have respect to the presence we are in,’ murmured Carmen; ‘this is no place for gallantry or pretence, Norberto.’

‘But I tell thee I love thee,’ urged Norberto, using the pronouns of intimacy and affection. ‘Before the Blessed Virgin I swear that I desire nothing but to please thee.’

‘You please me in nothing,’ answered Carmen, ‘nor ever can! I have asked but one favour of you in my life, and you have denied it.’

‘Carmencita *mia!* I have denied thee nothing!’

‘No? Worse,’ said Carmen. ‘You ignored my request. You endeavoured to kill the man whose life I begged.’

‘It was his own fault,’ retorted Norberto. ‘He threw himself upon me. He would have killed me.’

‘I have not heard that,’ said Carmen, who had not learned the exact particulars of the

matter, so spoke doubtfully. 'Yet even if that be true, you can now the better afford to be generous?'

'Carmencita, you are cruel,' murmured Norberto, in his most persuasive voice. 'Do not ask me to think of trifles in the hour I am permitted to be with thee. Think how long I have been parted from thee. Heaven knows I cannot forget, for I would ever be with thee. Consent, then, to be my wife. Thou shalt never regret it.'

'You know I have never loved you,' said Carmen, with an effort, 'yet I swear before the altar I will be a true wife to you if you will make possible the miracle for which these people are praying. Send a messenger to Cruz-Roja and save the life of Cosme Rul.'

'Thou hast strange caprices, Carmencita *mia*,' returned Norberto, hastily. 'We will talk of them to-morrow. To-night I am too happy that thou hast promised to be mine.'

'Never, unless you save him,' said Carmen. 'If I am asking a trifle, give it me. If my price is too high, and the man dies, blame not the saints that you lose me.'

'That shall not be!' cried Norberto, in a scarcely-guarded voice, so that people near them glanced astonished; 'but the man is a

devil, and my life would not be worth a *tlaco* if I spared him. Believe me, you will thank me, *Alma mia*, for refusing you. Ask me anything else in the world! *Dios mio!* a *peon* more or less is nothing.'

Carmen rose to her feet and passed him without a word. Norberto was enraged, but confident. 'She has accepted me, but with a whimsical proviso,' he said to Fernando as they crossed the *patio* together, for Carmen rapidly went onward alone, 'but the matter will settle itself.'

Fernando pressed the hand of the expectant bridegroom and laughed. He supposed the proviso a feigned one, of no importance, and upon entering the house looked around for his sister to offer her some sly banter, but she had gone directly to her room, a proceeding he thought modest and commendable.

'This is better than I hoped for,' remarked Don Isidor, 'but there is no accounting for the ways of women. I thought her desperately angry, Norberto, that you had so long delayed to visit her. It must be more than a lover's life since you have spoken with her?'

'True,' answered Norberto, 'though I fear it seemed not so long to her as to me, for she actually asked me to spare the fellow who

caused the delay. *Valgame Dios!* how long it is since he put an end to my solitary rides! I can never forgive it.'

'Tut, tut, a week is an age to a lover!' cried Don Isidor, 'and it is no longer than that ago I saw you at your lady's window.'

'Then your week has many days,' said Norberto, sourly, and Don Isidor, looking at him narrowly, saw that he was not speaking with a lover's exaggeration. The thought darted into his mind that the shadow he had once seen in the garden had seemed to him other than that of Norberto, but he dismissed it for the second time as impossible, and said nothing; still he wished, nevertheless, that he had descended into the garden on the night he had seen that shadow.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN the men were left alone Norberto Sanchez was at first inclined to relate the substance of his interview with Carmen, but a moment's thought convinced him that some doubt might be thrown upon the validity of his claim to be considered an accepted lover, though, to his own mind, the matter of the life or death of a *peon* having been placed in the balance against his marriage with the heiress of Tlaltelzingo was unworthy of a moment's consideration. In fact, it disappeared from his thoughts in the same instant that Fernando suggested that they should adjourn to his private room and engage in a friendly game of *monté*.

Don Isidor was as passionate a gambler as either of the young men, and a great deal more successful than his nephew, but he early deserted the young men, and, going to his own apartment, threw himself thoughtfully into an armchair. One of those great keys, which are

used commonly in country places in Mexico, and which are the remains of the days of feudalism, reminding one of cells and dungeons, though they are mere warders of chambers and wardrobes, lay upon the table.

Don Isidor took it up and weighed it in his hand. The chill of the iron served to keep him wakeful. He thought he heard a movement outside his window, and rose nervously and looked out. All was dark. The young men had closed the cedarn shutters of the room in which they were playing. His own window was the only one from which a light streamed, and he presently extinguished it and smoked his last cigarette in the starlight. 'Thank God that matter is settled,' he thought. 'Norberto was right, after all, to lose no time, for women like Carmen hate cowards, and there was something very like cowardice in that affair with the *peon*. *Caramba!* Norberto might well have interfered to save that boy. It would have been safer than to risk antagonising Carmencita. But all's well that ends well.'

Meanwhile Carmen knew nothing of the construction that Norberto had placed upon her words, but was racked with shame and rage that she had ever uttered them. She had

done all that a woman might, had offered herself, her life for that of a *peon*, and had been rejected. Had she pleaded for the life of a king she could not have offered more.

She tore off her laces and jewels, and, leaving them in a heap on the floor, threw herself face downward upon her bed. Presently she started up, and running to the bars of her window, grasped them as though she would have shaken them from their sockets. But for them she might have stolen from the place, but she was virtually in prison. Could she reach Cruz-Roja in person she knew her influence would be as powerful as that of Norberto or her brother, but a message would effect nothing, even if it was possible for her to send it.

Suddenly her despair culminated. Yet why should the thought of this man passing from the world, as hundreds, thousands of others had done, fill her brain with images of horror and her eyes with blood? She clasped her temples within her hands; they throbbed to bursting. Running to the chest in which she had laid the pistols Selsa had entrusted to her keeping, she caught up one in each hand. How they shone in the candle-light!

She looked at them long. That good Selsa

had not been so foolish after all, she thought, in bringing them to her. She lifted them nearer her eyes and examined them carefully. Yes, they were loaded, and could defend—or take—a life as they had often done before. She felt a kind of impotent anger at Cosme that he had so lightly parted from them. A bird stirred in the branches ; she heard it even through her closed shutter. The wind was rising. Oh, to feel its freshness on her hot brow ! How narrow her chamber seemed, and how demon-like the weapons in her hands. She blew out the candle, and, opening the shutters, sank down upon the window-sill, pressing her temples against the iron bars. A coma of sleep or faintness overcame her.

Presently she believed herself dreaming. A whisper sounded in her ears—a mere breath—yet she started. A figure leaned towards her from the shadow of a tree. She sprang to her feet, and the pistols fell clashing against the irons of the window.

‘ Cosme ! Cosme ! ’ she cried, in a low, intense voice that thrilled the man—that thrilled her own soul—and she stretched out her hands and suffered him to press burning kisses upon them as he murmured, ‘ If I die, it shall be at your feet.’ He kissed her hands as a devotee kisses

the sanctified image of an ideal, not presuming to touch them with his own. Nor, from the nature of the ground, could she touch him, though for a moment she strove to assure herself by the clasp of her fingers that a man of flesh and blood, and not a mere phantom, stood before her.

He shook with an excitement like her own, and as he bent over her hand he threw off his hat, and she heard his deep panting respiration, as though he had been running violently.

Cosme was the first to regain his calmness, and in a low voice told her the manner of his escape ; making it, by the bareness of his recital, appear a much more simple matter than it in reality had been. There had been some confusion in the early darkness at the crossing of the river ford. The soldiers, who had first plunged in in an undisciplined mass, had separated into small parties and swum for the shore as best they could. The recent heavy rains had swept away the usual landmarks. The prisoner, bound to his saddle—his horse being led by a lariat fastened to the saddle-bow of a trooper—managed in the *mêlée* to seize a *machete* and liberate himself, and swimming rapidly down the current, emerged upon the bank of the river which the party

had just left, and forcing his horse to its utmost speed, set many miles between them before his captors discovered the evasion.

‘But you were mad to come here,’ said Carmen. ‘This is the first place in which they will seek you.’

Cosme explained that his flight would probably not have been reported before the arrival of the soldiers at Cruz-Roja. He had a belief in their secret sympathy which perhaps misled him. But even had the troops been at the very walls of the hacienda, neither he nor Carmen would have known prudence. There was a watery moon floating through a mass of billowy clouds, and, to the eyes of each, it seemed to throw a glory upon the face of the other. Then left them in darkness before they read the meaning in each other’s eyes.

Cosme’s stained and rent garments were dripping with moisture. Carmen urged him to go to his hut and put on dry clothing, and eat and rest. Her insistence flushed him like wine.

‘Ah, *Niña*,’ he murmured, ‘to speak with you is better than food. And this is for the last time, for I must fly to the mountains. The Senor Norberto has determined that I shall not live, and in order to do so I must

go to the rocks and caves. Well! I shall find them. But there is Selsa and the rest.'

'And your happiness!' cried Carmen, indignantly. She knew the deep and inherent love that every Mexican feels for his *tierra* or birthplace, and comprehended the sacrifice to which he was forced. 'I was to blame! I knew what Norberto Sanchez is! Incapable of a noble thought. Yet I sent you to him.'

'*Niña*, it is for this I have come,' cried the man. 'I believed you were to marry him! I thought he must therefore be noble, but you have told me you despise him, that you will never marry him, and still I spared him lest you should repent.'

The passion which would have expressed itself, had Carmen been a woman of his own class, in maddened jealousy, had spent its strength in adoring loyalty, even against the temptations she herself had given him. At the hacienda of Santa-Trinita he had controlled himself because of her, else Norberto Sanchez would have been a dead man. The girl recognised something of this and it filled her breast with a terrible joy and pain. She began to question him, but her voice died in sighs.

Suddenly the restraint Cosme had put upon himself ceased. He told in impassioned tones

of the good faith in which he had gone to Santa-Trinita ; how he had been fired upon when he had proposed to return to Tlaltelzingo and give himself up to Fernando, that his *patron* might do with him as he would. How Norberto, in spite of the good will of Don Isidor and that of the officer of the *rurales*, had insisted, when he was arrested, that the law condemning bandits to death without trial should be carried into effect. How Norberto had raged when he was taken to Cruz-Roja. Every word he spoke declared that henceforth there was war to the death between him and Norberto Sanchez.

‘He feared to leave his house when he but fancied me his enemy,’ he concluded, ‘but now, warn him to beware, for I shall not always be forced to remain in the mountains. The *rurales* will not hunt forever a man who has done their work for them so well.’

‘I will tell him,’ answered Carmen, ‘but only when you are safe.’ She remembered the pistols Selsa had brought, and, stooping, raised them from the sill. He looked at them in astonishment while she explained how they had come into her possession.

He took them with flashing eyes.

‘Go ! Go, now, at once !’ cried Carmen.

‘There is danger—terrible danger! Norberto himself is here. He may come. The whole hacienda may be roused. The people are still in movement. There is a devotion in the church, and for you.’

Cosme knew that Selsa must be penniless and that Carmen herself must have borne the cost. His pulse bounded, then his face darkened.

‘You expect him here at your window,’ he said. ‘You will marry him; the Senora wills it.’

‘Never!’ cried Carmen. ‘Though this very night I would have given myself for thy life, but he would not spare you. Marry him? Never! I hate! I hate him!’

She spoke with an intensity that filled his soul with ecstasy and seemed to carry her own beyond the bounds of her material being. The moon threw a beam of light across the space that lay between them. It seemed like a glorified bridge. They could dimly see each other’s faces. Their eyes sought each the other’s, then fell abashed, then rose anew. They seemed for a brief moment like disembodied spirits. Earth and earth’s differences vanished. With eyes wide opened they saw mirrored in those of the other the reflection of their own souls.

Presently Carmen dropped her face upon her

hands, and the man stepped backward as if a spell had fallen from him.

‘Thou hast not loved him, thou hast not loved him!’ he gasped, unconsciously using the form of equality, of love.

‘And thou thinkest she loves thee?’ cried a furious voice, and at the same moment he staggered under the thrust of a knife in his shoulder. It was that of Don Isidor, who cried hoarsely, ‘*A mi! A mi!* Here in the garden! Fernando! Norberto! At Carmen’s window! Here!’

Carmen screamed, and Cosme clutched his assailant in a desperate attempt to disarm him. Had this been other than Don Isidor, though twice as powerful, the task would have been easy, but the person of the old hacendado was sacred, and Cosme said hoarsely,—

‘Let me go, Don Isidor. I knew not what I was doing. I will kill myself if I have brought any dishonour upon the Senorita. Yet I will not suffer you to hold me to die like a dog. *Dios mio!* but you are strong, and the others come.’

The noise of men running down the stairs into the garden was heard. The alarm had reached the ears of the players, and they rushed out, calling to the servants of the house.

‘Senor, you force me,’ and with this half apology Cosme, almost lifting the hacendado in his arms,

forced him to the edge of the terrace, and suddenly tore himself away, while Don Isidor staggered helplessly down the steep declivity, and struck, with some force, against the roughcast wall of the house.

By this time Fernando had reached the window, and Norberto, from the shadow of the shrubbery, had begun firing wildly. The attitude of Cosme, who had thrown himself into a position of defence, proclaimed him a foe, but Fernando surmised nothing more than that he was a fugitive from the law, until Don Isidor cried,

‘Kill him, Fernando! Kill him, Norberto! He is the lover of Carmen. It is he who has stood at her window when we thought it Norberto. Kill him, Norberto, if you are a man!’

Fernando sprang upon Cosme, casting an epithet at Carmen, which struck upon her like a stinging blow. ‘Fly, fly, Cosme!’ she cried. ‘Oh, Fernando! Fernando!’

The *peon* had cast off the young hacendado as though he were a child. The garden was filling with men, but he stood like a lion at bay. Norberto had dropped into the safe depth of the terrace by the side of Don Isidor, who, foaming with rage, vainly endeavoured to ascend. Norberto pulled him back. ‘He is armed; I see the pistols in his belt!’ he exclaimed.

‘Yes, I saw the traitoress give them to him,’ cried Don Isidor. ‘God! he has shot Fernando.’

At the same moment Fernando dropped back against a tree. His pistol arm was broken. ‘It is nothing!’ cried Cosme, to Carmen. Even in the excitement he had calculated so well that his aim he knew had been exact. He had designed merely to disable, not kill. ‘Oh, my Senorita, I love thee! But a *peon* can be nothing to thee! It is I alone who must suffer. *Adios! Adios!*’

‘Forever! forever!’ answered Carmen, distractedly. ‘Yet it is I who have erred. It is I who must forever regret. Go, go, if you would not see me die before you!’

The men were upon him, but with almost incredible agility and strength Cosme threw them off. The garden blazed with lights and resounded with shouts and the crack of pistols. The place was full of people, yet before they knew how, or whither, Cosme Rul disappeared, and Carmen staggered back into the darkness of her room.

Don Isidor hastened to the side of Fernando, who, almost oblivious to his wound, was madly and bitterly reproaching himself for having openly declared the weakness of Carmen. Even if the *peon* had been discovered at her window, who would have dared to suspect or

accuse her but himself. But the mischief was done, and Norberto emphasised it by bursting into a loud and nervous laugh. 'By heavens! I am happy to have no more formidable a rival than this low-born wretch; a cavalier might have been a serious obstacle. This—' He blew his fingers, and tossed an imaginary thistle-down in the air.

'Hush!' cried Fernando, furiously. A galloping horse was heard on the mountain; the menservants had rushed to the walls, and ran up and down like ants. The young hacendado went to his sister's window and called her name.

Carmen did not answer. Her brother's voice seemed to bear to her ear only the opprobrious word he had spoken. She knew it false, unjust, yet she stood clutching her breast in an agony of humiliation. The pride of race, the tradition of caste, cried in her ears like living things. But above them sounded the hoof-beats of the horse upon the mountain. They beat upon her brain with maddening insistency. Abased, despairing, she fell upon her knees.

'Great God! I knew it not,' she said, 'but it is true. I love him! I love him! I love him!'

CHAPTER XIII

HAVING once admitted to herself the truth, Carmen Valdivia was incapable of relegating it to the secret recesses of her mind or of denying the charges and accusations brought against her. Cosme Rul was thenceforth neither seen nor heard of, and there was a suspicion among the police that he might actually have made away with himself in dismay at the storm his temerity had brought upon him. One would have thought it incredible that news should fly so quickly from so remote a spot, but with intense mortification the family at Tlaltelzingo soon learned that their domestic vexations were rolled as a sweet morsel under the palates of all the gossips of Cruz-Roja and Casco. Conscious of this, Carmen was bowed down with shame, while still her love yielded neither to reason nor remorse.

Comparing her with the vivacious creature of a few weeks before, one was reminded of the old simile of a porcelain lamp, once ruddy and

bright with light and heat, standing with central flame expiring, and becoming each moment more cold and dull, until the final one of its extinction.

The common people began to look at her with awe. Surely the *Niña* would die. And for love of a *peon*? So strange a thing had never been heard. Carmen herself felt dimly that she had become a new and exceptional creature, and that her attitude towards all her world had changed. At times it filled her with despair, and at others she rejoiced. At least she was free from Norberto, she thought. She was free, as one might be who had plunged from a dizzy height. She was virtually thrust out of the pale of her own sphere, for, after the first terrible reproaches with which her grandmother assailed her, the old lady seldom spoke to her, and her brother and uncle never. Undoubtedly the effect upon the mind of Carmen was that made by the dark cell upon that of a criminal, and helped to make less and less clear to her consciousness the lines she should follow through the dark labyrinth into which she had fallen.

The only mitigation of her situation as time went on was the continued failure to discover Cosme Rul. The gap in the garden wall was left unmended, as though it were a trap into

which he might fall, but he never approached it, nor did Norberto. She neither saw him nor heard of his being at the hacienda, though, much to her surprise, those who could bring her news were freely allowed to approach her, particularly Selsa Rul. Perhaps the family conjectured that the sight of this girl—this Indian with her ignorance and squalor—would make the thought of the brother a torment or a jest to the young aristocrat. At first it was so—not a jest, but a horror—but one day the two without a word fell into each other's arms and wept, and thereafter her converse with the peasant was all that kept the mind of Carmen from despair. The girl looked at her with eyes of comprehension that bore no trace of the insolent suggestions in those of other women. She was too young and ignorant, and perhaps of too pure a heart to cast a slur upon a love which seemed to her like that of the angels. It was only when she spoke of the possibility of her brother's death that she saw an expression upon the face of Carmen that for a moment made her feel the lady cruel, for Carmen could not but indulge the hope the suggestion brought her. 'Ah! if they could both die and this pain be ended.' But Cosme was a man too strong and resourceful for

death, and she? It was too much to hope for, though her grandmother angrily warned her that was what would come if she still held to her folly.

One of the phases of her mental and moral suffering that tormented her most was a positive and haunting sense of wrong done to her family. Not by her love to Cosme. Of that she could not, and made no effort to repent, but by the impossibility it had caused of her fulfilling the destiny they had planned for her as the instrument of restoring the prosperity of Tlaltelzingo. She rejoiced to think herself free from Norberto Sanchez, because she detested him, but, that through her, he should have been made an active enemy to Fernando, as doubtless he was, added bitterly to her griefs. She knew the implacability of the Mexican character, and although she was ready and anxious to resign her own fortune for the purpose, she felt that money paid to the uttermost farthing would do nothing to satisfy the sense of injury and insatiable rancour of their creditor.

Mexicans never forget a wrong, though there may be a few who can forgive it. Carmen herself, however, was not one of them, but was as tenacious in hate as in love. Therefore she

was well able to conceive the feelings that burned in the heart of Norberto Sanchez, and if she had read her own mind aright she would also have been able to guess his determination to avenge them. She had always been averse to the project of marriage with Norberto, even in the early time when she seemed to be upon the point of acceding to it, and doubtless this had been a potent factor in the subtle facility with which her affections had so completely overcome her reason and prudence in her intercourse with Cosme Rul. That Norberto, on the contrary, had set his mind upon it, even before he loved her, should have warned her that he would not abandon it even then. Had he not said a cavalier might have proved an obstacle, refusing to consider seriously the *peon*? But that was before the tongues of gossip began to wag. Carmen forgot the obstinacy of her race and his, and she did not know that a man's sweetest revenge may be dedicated and paid to the woman he takes to wife.

Carmen had long neglected confession, not because her conscience was hardened against a sense of sin, but that, during the first days of her interviews with Cosme, she had felt impelled to guard his secret from even her

confessor. Later, when she had her hopeless love to confess, she could not promise repentance, and so believed she would but add to her transgression by rejecting the counsels of the good Padre Nicanor ; but at length she yielded to his entreaties and her own longing for sympathy, and unburdened her heart to him.

To her surprise and consolation he accepted without reproof her avowal that she could not destroy nor repent of her misplaced love, and that her only remorse was for the humiliation and perhaps subsequent heritage of enmity it had brought upon her family.

The priest set her a penance, and then strove to comfort her with the assurance that nothing was to be changed by her folly. Norberto Sanchez, he said, had recognised the impossibility that a lady of the Valdivias could have stooped to a vulgar intrigue with a *peon*, and Carmen knew, as well as he, that marriage with such an one was impossible, so that Norberto had chosen to ignore the transient wandering of her affections and demanded the fulfilment of her promise. Briefly, her family had named the day, and her nuptials would be celebrated forthwith.

Carmen was stunned. She could but

repeat, 'It cannot be, I never gave a promise to Norberto Sanchez. What, at the altar? Never.'

'Ah! the proviso was nothing! The life or death of a man who could be neither your lover nor husband could have nothing to do with the question of your marriage, so the promise was complete and the proviso without effect.'

'My God!' cried Carmen, in despair, 'Norberto himself saw Cosme at my window. He knows—all know—that I love him.'

'Repent, repent,' urged the priest, 'and to that end do works meet for repentance. Obey those who are your natural protectors and have a right to command reparation of your fault; offer to the Church a public guarantee of your intention to separate yourself from that accursed thing—an unhallowed love.'

'I will do anything rather than marry,' cried Carmen. 'I will enter a convent.'

'It is not required,' answered the priest, coldly. 'The penance the Church requires of you is marriage, not prayer and solitude.'

'But my marriage with Norberto would be unhallowed, accursed,' urged Carmen, imploringly. 'I cannot love Norberto Sanchez.'

'But you can be true to him,' replied the

father, impassively, 'and make your vows a sacrifice for the sins of the soul. Marriage should not be a mere carnal delight. For you it may be an atonement, and will, perhaps, purify and chastise your spirit, and save you from damnation. Surely it will free the man you love from the snare of your fascinations, and perhaps save him from death. As the wife of Don Norberto what may you not ask and obtain of him?'

But nothing that the priest could urge could convince Carmen of the possibility of the marriage. Norberto himself, she declared, could never desire it. What man in all the land would condone such an offence as hers? He did not love her; and even had he once fancied he did so, why should he now make himself the byword of the district? Her share in Tlaltelzingo would surely offset his claims against it, and it had never been pretended that the marriage had been projected from any motive but convenience. No; she would not believe that Fate designed to put this trick upon her.

The priest declared her obdurate and refused her absolution. This soon became known, and even the servants looked at her askance, and answered her in monosyllables when she spoke to them, and she dared not rebuke them. More

than once some one of the villagers rose from the altar in the church as she approached it and hurried away. She felt like a leper without hope on earth or in heaven.

Her uncle and brother maintained a frowning silence, and when her grandmother spoke it was with an accent of sufferance that gave a tinge of gall to her most indifferent words. One day, however, she called the young girl in something like her ancient tone of affectionate interest, and leading the way to her room, opened a case and displayed the *dones*—the magnificent wedding gown which, according to custom, had been sent by the expectant bridegroom—and other beautiful garments, with jewels and laces fit for a princess. No evidence of what was expected of her could have been more conclusive.

‘I have never given my word,’ she gasped. ‘Norberto has deceived himself. I—’

‘It is you who have deceived yourself,’ interrupted the Senora. ‘Upon the very night you accepted him he spoke of it to your brother—that night which you must surely remember.’

‘I do! I do!’ cried Carmen. ‘And I declare that Norberto speaks falsely when he says I consented to marry him.’

‘I know the plea that you make,’ said the

Senora. 'Norberto looked upon your escapade as one of your senseless coquetries, and you may thank the saints that he does so still.'

'And is it a coquetry that I love the *peon*?' cried Carmen. 'Does Norberto find that a jest? I must see him. If he will not spare me for my sake he must for his own. I will go on my knees, if need be, and make so humble an apology that he will, for very pity, beg Fernando to take me away to some convent where no one will hear of me. All that should be mine shall go to satisfy his claim upon Tlaltelzingo.'

'Ah, yes, and leave Fernando penniless,' retorted the Senora. 'What will be the use of the land without money? Besides, it is not the mere payment of a money debt that will redeem the honour of your family or salve the insult you have put upon Sanchez. You cannot heal a broken skull by patting it. You say your life is nothing; then sacrifice it. Is your soul nothing that you would lose that too?'

Carmen shuddered. 'My soul!' she muttered, looking at the gown upon the bed as though it were a shroud. 'My soul! Oh! would it were shrived! My soul!' Then she laughed in a strange, introspective way. 'Oh! if I marry Sanchez, surely my soul will pass pur-

gatory before I die! I shall enter into heaven whether Padre Nicanor absolves me or not.'

'Wicked girl!' cried her grandmother, violently incensed. And she poured upon Carmen those vials of wrath that seemed to refill with venom every time they were emptied upon the head of her grandchild. But Carmen this time fled before them and ran to her brother's room.

To her broken exclamations and prayers he answered coldly,—

'What would you, Carmen? Norberto Sanchez claims your hand. He sees in your conduct nothing to bar you from the honour you accepted. Shall I, your brother, cast the stone at you?'

'You did it,' said Carmen, 'and you dare not lift it now. You force me to marry when to die would be better.'

'I cannot kill you,' replied Fernando, sullenly, 'and neither I nor anyone can force you to marry. When the judge questions you, answer as you will; but, except as the wife of Norberto Sanchez, you are no longer a sister of mine. But worship your Idol of Bronze if you will; refuse this penance—if penance you think it—to marry Norberto Sanchez and no priest will absolve you.'

Carmen stood with hands pressed to her temples.

‘Norberto Sanchez is easily pleased,’ continued Fernando, unconsciously wounding her to the quick. ‘Who but he would marry you after what has passed?’

‘Who, indeed?’ echoed Carmen, in desperation; ‘and he is worthy of no better fate than to marry a woman who loves a *peon*. Go, tell him so from me.’ And with this last flash of her impetuous spirit Carmen turned and left Fernando humiliated in the midst of victory.

CHAPTER XIV

IF Carmen had had the vague hope that her bitter taunt would have the least effect in regard to her destiny, she soon became assured to the contrary, though she learned in some indirect way that her message had been delivered. Fernando took a malicious pleasure in testing to the utmost the complacence of the man whose pusillanimity he despised. The relations between the two men were severely strained. Had Norberto withdrawn his claim to the hand of Carmen it would have been looked upon as the greatest insult to the house of Valdivia ; but that on the contrary he should persist in it, upon what was at best a doubtful promise, and one which Carmen utterly ignored, made him an object of contempt and suspicion. The material interests involved were all in favour of the Valdivias. Not gain nor love, therefore revenge, was believed to be at the root of his obstinacy.

Carmen must pay the price of her imprudence, in so far as fulfilling the contract of marriage with Norberto Sanchez was concerned, but her brother salved such scruples as he felt in constraining her by vowing within himself to protect her from any form of cruelty her husband's ire might take.

The day for barbarities had passed. There was a tale of a Sanchez who had caused the abundant locks of his recreant wife to be shorn, and had covered her head with a cap made of the tanned skin of her lover. Norberto might have inherited the traits of his ancestor, but he lived in the nineteenth, not in the sixteenth century. Would he leave his bride at the door of the church?

Every reason was opposed to such a supposition, but Fernando tormented himself with a thousand speculations, which the silence of Carmen augmented rather than decreased.

Although the young girl knew that her marriage day was set, she made no inquiries as to what would be expected of her; and her seeming indifference, which was not indifference, in fact, but a pessimistic resignation to fate, was more effective than the most violent opposition would have been in filling the minds of her relations with the most

harrowing anxiety as to what course she might take at the last hour.

The plan which had been arranged, that Padre Nicanor should refuse her absolution until after the civil ceremony was performed, seemed to make it almost a certainty that she would consent to it. Then, whether the Church blessed her union or no, the marriage would be legal, and there was no reason to suppose that she would cause a useless scandal by declining any of the nuptial honours paid to more willing brides.

It was decided, as a precaution against the confidence she might place in the judge who was to conduct the civil ceremony, if he should put the usual questions as to her free will in her own home, to surround her with a strange environment. Therefore, instead of the official receiving a request to present himself at Tlaltelzingo, he was notified that he would be honoured by the visit of the contracting parties at his own office. A detachment of servants was sent to Cruz-Roja to make ready a banquet which was to be served in the best house the village contained, and which was of course the property of the Valdivias. Relatives and friends were to meet there and accompany the bridal party to

Tlaltelzingo, and upon the following day, after the bride had been duly shrived, the Church ceremony would be performed, and the wedding feast and ball succeed. Nothing was to be omitted which could give honour to the occasion and tend to silence carping tongues.

Upon the appointed day Carmen was roused early by the sound of guitars and harps played by the village musicians. She listened to the minor strains, breathing the quaint rhythm of *danzas* and *jarabes*, such as might greet the wedding morn of some peasant maid. It seemed a cruel mockery, but she had no tears to shed ; and with set face and stony eyes arranged her toilette, rejecting the gown that had been prepared for her and putting on the first one upon which her hand fell as she opened her wardrobe. It chanced to be that water-stained garment in which she had arrived from the city of Mexico. It hung upon her figure now like an ill-made sack, and revealed the change that the fever of life had wrought in those short months.

‘*Valgame Dios !*’ cried her grandmother, when she entered the room to summon her, ‘what a figure for a bride ! And no rouge ? no powder ? You are mad !’ for the girl was

deadly pale, and the greens and browns, that require the alchemy of health and happiness to make an olive skin beautiful, circled her large black eyes, which were heavy from lack of sleep or from secret tears.

‘Nothing matters,’ answered Carmen, ‘only do not trouble me, grandmother. Let it be soon over if you will have it so,’ and she took a large black shawl, such as ladies wear over their heads to mass, and began to open it. Her *desayuno*, or food with which to break her fast, lay untouched upon the table.

‘*Maria Sanctisima!*’ ejaculated the old lady, and pushing the girl into a chair she literally forced her to swallow the thick brown chocolate, and, strengthened by the nourishing draught, Carmen ate a few morsels of bread.

‘Her prettiest hat,’ said the imperious Senora to a servant. ‘Here, Carmen, see how well you look in spite of your carelessness!’ But the girl resolutely set aside the proffered hat and adjusted the shawl, and, covered so, led the way from the room. Her door was on the opposite side of the broad corridor from that whence the massive staircase led to the lower court, where a carriage was standing, and also a number of horses saddled and bridled. The men who were to ride them were talking gaily

with the many women and children who had gathered to witness the departure of the wedding party. As she passed slowly around the corridor Carmen gazed listlessly down. She knew everyone assembled, except the few men who formed the escort of Norberto, and they stood for the most part leaning upon their horses and wrapped in their *jorongos*, for they were heated with riding, and guarded themselves against the chill of the shaded court.

Norberto had ridden fast in the cool of the morning. He looked somewhat jaded, and was talking to Fernando near the head of the staircase. His eyes wandered sullenly from side to side. As Carmen approached an expression of anger passed over his face. He noticed her careless attire, and said in a low voice to Fernando,—

‘She has lost her beauty. I am paying a great price for my devotion ; that must be considered in the final settlement, *amigo*.’

Fernando muttered an oath as Norberto moved forward to greet his bride, while her brother and uncle merely bowed low to her. They were supposed to have spoken to her in private, but, in fact, speech from them depended upon her conduct in the next few hours, and it pleased her better so. The time

for pleading or reproach had passed, and the mere compliments of words would have been unbearable.

The Senora passed on and joined the men of her family and Padre Nicanor; they endeavoured to chat with a show of animation, but scanned the court, from which rose a hubbub of voices, with gloomy but watchful eyes. Curiously enough those people, who thought themselves and their affairs as much above the common herd as the sky is above the earth, listened with strained ears for any sound of discontent or threatening. But all was light and joyous as it should be; the *plebe* love a *fiesta* and excitement even at their own cost, and upon this day it was to be at that of the Senores. The ox was ready for the *barbecue*, there were chickens and turkeys stewed with tomatoes and chile, and baskets full of *tamales*, pots of *agua-miel* and stronger liquors, and dough for *tortillas* lying upon the grinding stones. There was music, and later there would be games and dancing. Nothing could be better.

Norberto placed himself at Carmen's side and took her unwilling hand. 'You make me the happiest of men,' he said in stereotyped phrase, 'but you appear sad.' He glanced over

her dress rather than at her face. 'One would think I am not the husband of your choice.'

'You mock me,' said Carmen. 'You know I never loved you. I never gave you a promise. Why do you persist? No happiness can come to you in marrying a woman like me.'

'You accuse yourself too much,' answered Norberto, with a look that pierced her.

'I accuse myself of nothing,' answered Carmen, the blood rising to her cheeks then leaving them paler than before. 'It is you who accuse me, and they'—she nodded towards the family. 'You force me to dishonour marriage, with you. Only so, they say, may I secure the salvation of my soul. But I would lose it, Norberto, rather than involve an honourable man in my humiliation.'

'You should have thought of that long ago,' said Norberto.

'Alas! I thought of nothing,' answered Carmen. 'Why should I have dreamed of love? Yet it overcame me like a flood, it swept me from happiness, from hope. Such love for another should keep us from marriage.'

'Yet it brings you to my arms,' said Norberto.

Carmen looked at him. His lips curled with a smile that looked like a snarl. 'I

have a fancy to marry you. Fast bind, fast find.'

'Marriage with you cannot further separate me from the man I love, nor to refrain from it bring him nearer,' she replied.

'Truly an amiable consent to the inevitable,' answered Norberto, 'and I shall well know how to requite it! By the way, you once asked me a favour. I did not know it so nearly concerned your happiness. Have you nothing to ask of me now?'

'Nothing,' she said, 'that you would grant.'

'Not his life?' he queried with pent-in rage that caused a hissing sound as the words passed his lips.

'No,' she replied. 'If he loves life he will defend it; if not, the sooner a bullet ends it, the sooner his pain will cease.'

'It is well you ask nothing for him,' exclaimed Norberto, violently. 'It is death between me and him, and for the rest—I know you wish to escape me—but, by Heaven, No!'

They spoke no more but walked on and joined the group at the head of the stairs. Norberto's face was deeply flushed and Carmen was as pale as death. The Padre Nicanor pitied the girl, while he honestly believed he

was doing God and the family of Valdivia loyal service by threatening this suffering creature with eternal exile from the consolations of the Church, and forcing her into temporal relations which her soul abhorred.

‘My daughter, take courage,’ he whispered. ‘All will be well. To-morrow the burden of your sin will have fallen from you. You will be a creature fit for God.’

‘And for death,’ murmured the girl. Then she put her hand into that of her uncle and began the descent of the steps.

The priest started. Would this inexplicable girl pass through the civil ceremony of marriage with Norberto Sanchez, receive the sacrament, and before the blessing of the Church was given, and the ratification of her nuptials took place, destroy herself and thus filch her passport into Heaven? Did she not know that were an unpardonable sin?

He started forward. ‘Oh God! Had she risked damnation for her freedom?’

He heard a pistol shot. Another and another. Screams, oaths, the rushing and trampling of horses, and saw a whirl of confusion around the carriage that obstructed the courtyard. A man on horseback, with a burden in his arms, forced a way through the throng; while

others sought to quiet the rearing horses and spring to their saddles.

‘*Un plajio!* Cosme Rul! Cosme Rul, he has seized the Senorita! He has killed Don Norberto! Don Isidor! No, no, it is Don Fernando! Both are dead!’

No, they have sprung to their feet, uttering curses and contrary orders. Was ever such excitement, such daring seen? The people of the hacienda shouted in voices bordering on distraction; the women wept and lamented, yet through all rang an accent of exultation. Where else in all the land would there have been found a man so bold as to do such a deed? Only Cosme Rul would have thought to seize a woman from the midst of her own people—from the very arms of her bridegroom—and have succeeded in escaping from such a multitude.

Many men rushed to the doors, thus impeding the exit of pursuers, even when they had caught their startled horses and sprung to their saddles. The delay was but of moments, yet they gave a surprising advantage to the abductor, for he had urged his horse down a slope at a pace that would have sent both the animal and man headlong, but that they were possessed of great natural strength, which was augmented by that which rises in rare emergencies.

Evidently the captor's purpose had been to gain the valley, but suddenly he saw the glitter of arms in the sun. Norberto had secretly secured this escort of soldiers who were awaiting the arrival of the carriage at a certain point, and without a moment's hesitation Cosme Rul plunged into one of the deep ravines that, immediately after the rainy season, offer an almost impenetrable covert.

When Cosme Rul had stooped from his horse and seized Carmen, as many a ranchero, to show off his fine horsemanship, stoops and seizes a child, she had struggled and screamed, yielding to the natural impulse of fright. But as he lifted her to his saddle-bow she caught sight of his dark, set face, and uttering his name in a cry of joy clung to him wildly, forgetting in a moment all but that he was her love, her saviour. He felt her breath upon his cheek, her hands upon his shoulders. An almost savage joy irradiated his face; another moment and her arms encircled his neck. The love of the devotee was gone; the love of a man for the one woman that fate and passion appoints for him sprang into being. No bridegroom nor brother, or any power of earth or hell, should part her from him. He who had never dreamed that he

might touch his divinity, clasped the captured woman close to his breast. She who, even in the madness of her love, had held it impossible that their lives could mingle, felt that thenceforth they would be as one, bound by a power that was irresistible, all-conquering. Her heart beat madly against his; their rhythm was the same—a tumult of love, triumph and dismay as she was borne onward from home, wedlock, misery, into a wilderness and what? What?

CHAPTER XV

THE desperate deed of Cosme Rul had not been planned. In his wanderings he had learned of the time set for the marriage, and at daybreak that morning, under cover of his *jorongo*, which he drew up around his face as a safeguard from recognition, as the other men did from cold ; he had joined the escort of Norberto Sanchez, determined to look once more upon the face of Carmen. He felt that some miracle must happen to prevent her from marrying the man of whom she had expressed such detestation, and whom Cosme hated more as her lover than as his own implacable enemy. But it was not until he saw her descending the stairs to enter the carriage, and read the despair upon her countenance, that he felt that he was to be her deliverer. To seize her from Norberto Sanchez—from the hateful fate that threatened her—was his only thought. That she might be his—that he would make her the sharer of

his own dark destiny did not occur to him. Had he paused a moment for thought, his mad act would never have been accomplished. He murmured something of this as they rushed onward. Had she then uttered a protest—a regret, he would have risked his life to restore her to those from whom he had wrested her, but Carmen felt an intoxication of freedom. All trammels had been violently torn away. She had escaped from Sanchez—from the old life and misery; she was with Cosme Rul and—love. Come what might, she would meet it.

The sight of the *rurales* upon the road to the valley disconcerted Cosme not a little, for they not only cut off the passage in that direction where they might hope most readily to find shelter, but forced him to the mountains and surrounded them with enemies which would prove much more crafty, courageous and vigilant than the villagers and *rancheros*—men of his own caste and with sympathies aroused for the lovers—would have been. Cosme knew the nature of his own people. They had looked upon him as a hero, not so much for his killing the bandits—Pedro Ortiz in particular—for his mother's sake and for the appropriation of Don Norberto's pistols for the purpose. That

had appealed to their sense of humour. Then the rumour of the unprecedented favour shown him by the lady of Tlaltelzingo had encircled him with a halo of romance which would certainly gain lustre from this crowning exploit. But the *rurales* were of another stamp, and their numbers in a few hours would be vastly augmented. Meanwhile he felt certain that his course had been guessed, and he knew too well that woodsmen more cunning than he would penetrate the jungle he had entered or drive him thence with fire. So bidding Carmen cover her face with her shawl, he cut a way with his *macheté* through the thorny bushes, or forced his horse through tangled grasses and tall reeds so thick that they closed after them like water, and hid their track almost as completely. After hours of struggle they emerged upon the foothills, miles from the spot he would have chosen, and yet not so far but that they heard hoarse shouts in the distance, and saw long spirals of smoke rising from the route they had passed.

Driven from the valley, his only hope of reaching safety was in seeking some one of the almost inaccessible cliffs of *el desierto*, in which were caves where they might find shelter. But on what should they subsist? How hence reach

some more habitable spot? His thoughts were chiefly for the present exigency, and so happily were those of Carmen. She was losing something of the exultation which had at first sustained her, but still her courage was undaunted.

Cosme left her alone for a time that he might seek water, which they needed more than food. In the distance she could see the walls and towers of Tlaltelzingo. She gazed at them curiously, as though she had only known them in some other world, so surely she felt herself cut off from them for ever. There was silence all around her, for neither birds nor animals frequented the mountains. There was nothing to supply the wants of human beings, other than the prickly fruit of the *nopales*. Presently she tried to pluck some, but her delicate fingers were powerless against their thorny armour, and a sense of utter helplessness rushed over her. She trembled and stretched her arms upward towards the sky; not towards Tlaltelzingo, not to earth, but to heaven. She almost wondered to see the sky bending over her, here as calm and blue as it had wont to be; everything else had changed so utterly. Never in all her life before had she been alone outside a garden wall or the confines of her own chamber. From the windows of the hacienda she had been ac-

customed to overlook the vast stretches of the mountains, but she had never crossed them, and had formed no adequate idea of their immensity and solitude. Now both overcame her, and she—the aristocrat—who had filled so large a part in the world she knew, seemed the merest atom cast out upon this wilderness. She wondered if every peasant woman felt this same insignificance; for now what was she but a peasant—the mate of a peasant? She started. Up to this moment she had not realised that it must be so. In wresting her from Tlaltelzingo, Cosme Rul had wrested her from all the possibilities which her birth had opened to her. There, alone upon the mountain, with throes of agony, yet with a vivifying determination and joy, she felt herself born into a new existence. With her eyes fixed upon Tlaltelzingo she uttered a mute farewell to it and all within. Strangely enough, never in all her life had they seemed so dear, yet they were to her as the dead, and Tlaltelzingo was their tomb.

Presently she rose, and changing her attitude looked in the opposite direction, and far upon the edge of the sky saw a train rapidly speeding northward. It was miles upon miles away. But if it might be reached? If they could gain some place where they were unknown? Carmen

Valdivia felt the stirring of ambition, of hope. There was that in her that defied fate and still looked forward and upward.

Cosme remained away from her long enough for her to begin to fear for his safety, yet when she beheld him stepping cautiously under the shade of the trees, she trembled with a new emotion which, she felt by some subtle change in the glance with which he regarded her, thrilled him also. She glanced down upon her draggled and torn garments and blushed. An exchange of their relations seemed to have come. There in the wilds he was lord, and she was no longer to command but to follow him. He wore the suit of leather in which he had last come to her window, and it had withstood the passage through the jungle better than her own lighter garments. His hat was pushed back from his eyes, and they shone proudly, though with a perplexed gravity, as they encountered those of Carmen. Strangely, to her eyes, he had lost the characteristics of the hacienda *peon*, and seemed a special creation or product of the scene around them to which she felt so foreign, and in which she was so helpless.

He had left his horse picketed near by, and approached her with a long-necked gourd full

of water in his hand, and with his striped blanket full of tunas, the fruit of the cactus. As he displayed them before her, calling her *Senorita*, he explained that the nearest village was many miles away, and that the nearest habitation was that of a charcoal burner higher up in the forest, but that they could easily reach it by nightfall.

Carmen's heart sank. She had hoped that they might reach some village, and, in the guise of peasants, steal into the little church at the first Mass at daybreak, and in the sight of God be made man and wife. Like most of her countrywomen she attached much more importance to the Church ritual than the civil law, though the one was illegal without the last. Cosme gave no sign that he guessed aught of what was passing in her thoughts, but urged her to eat and drink. He sat beside her and opened the thorny rinds of the fruit with his clasp-knife, and by this time they were so hungry that they ate them with a relish, which sadly failed them thereafter when this desert-given food of the poor was their only resource, and became as dust and ashes in their mouths.

But upon this day the coarse fruit was ambrosia, and as the two fugitives watched the spreading fires in the lowlands they began

to talk of their further flight. They had little fear of immediate danger, as they were sheltered from casual comers and out of the route that horsemen would take. As they recalled the scene of the morning, Cosme told her how and why he had ventured to the hacienda; how an irresistible impulse had come over him to seize her. But of the actual occurrences of the time he could tell her as little as she could deduce from her own confused recollections. There had been a fusillade of pistol shots. Had Cosme killed Norberto or her brother? With the optimism of youth Carmen would not believe it possible. She had heard their voices in the *mêlée*, as she had the screams of the Senora. Carmen shed some tears as she thought of her. But she laughed when they spoke of her uncle. She pictured his dismay when she had been so unceremoniously snatched from him. There was no intuition that told them that a ball—whether from the pistol of Cosme or Norberto was never proved—had pierced the heart of Don Isidor, and that this unintentional deed had augmented doubly the danger in which they stood. Possibly prudence and scorn on the part of her family would have induced a laggard pursuit of the alleged bandit with the woman who loved him, and who could never

be reinstated to the rank from which she had fallen, and for whom exile was the only alternative to a convent, but the murder of Don Isidor allowed of no hesitation. It had infuriated the aristocrats and *rurales*, and entirely destroyed the sympathy of the *peones*.

As soon as their frugal meal was finished Cosme rose, held out his hand to Carmen, and bade her rise; and though he trembled as he touched her, she noticed that the less, because she feared he would observe that she too trembled. Whither should they go? They both looked longingly back into the valley, but the risk was too great. They could never reach the railway by that route. They could never dare to go to Cruz-Roja, but must essay the crossing of the mountain and the descent upon the farther side, whence they might reach a tiny station they had both heard of a good distance to the south.

When they had ridden some miles—though with great difficulty, for the forest was dense and the way rough — Cosme found to his dismay that the beast had fallen lame, and that they might hope to make much more rapid progress afoot. So after a hasty consultation it was decided to abandon it. In any case it would have become necessary to do so in a few hours,

as their way to the crest of the mountain would lie through deep ravines and over crags which no horseman could pass. Besides, when once the pursuers were upon the mountain, speed would avail them little. They would be obliged to hide in nooks and crannies, and glide from shelter to shelter.

Carmen looked on with sorrowful impatience as Cosme removed the saddle from the horse and set it free. He hid the more cumbersome articles in the thick bushes, and making a pack in his *jorongo* of the water-bottle, the bridle and such thongs of leather as he knew would be of service, fastened it upon his back. He removed the spurs from his feet and, *machéte* in hand, led the way in that pilgrimage beset with dangers such as Carmen's wildest imaginings were powerless to picture, which lasted days and nights without cessation, till she lost count of both, and time seemed to lapse into eternity.

At first she walked bravely, but in truth she knew not what positive bodily exertion, or what distance meant. Besides, her delicately-clad feet were bruised and wounded by the stones and thorns. Cosme soon beheld her condition with surprise and consternation, and strove to cheer her with the assurance that they were not far from a *ranchito*, where they could pass the

night, and at least find a supper of goat's milk and *tortillas*. But darkness came on and they were still far from the hut, and Carmen sank down, entreating Cosme to leave her.

He would have lifted her in his arms and still pressed on, but in the midst of the darkness, in the exhaustion of weariness, a fear of him which she had never felt before seized upon her. 'Go! go!' she cried. 'I will not be afraid here alone in this forest, but I can go no farther. Oh! the moon is rising, and you look so terrible.'

He stopped before her. She had covered her face with her shawl and was weeping. He was too near Nature not to be moved by the possibilities of his association with this beautiful woman, but his voice was cold and his words almost harsh as he bade her seat herself at the foot of a tree. Then taking a paltry crucifix from his neck, he kissed it and placed it in her hands.

No words could have conveyed to her so perfect an assurance of safety. She ceased weeping and repeated her nightly prayers. Cosme spread his blanket upon the ground and circled it with his horsehair *riata*, for there were many insects and serpents to be driven back by its harshness, and she covered herself with her shawl and lay down and slept.

In the morning she woke early and found herself alone. Presently Cosme appeared with a store of wild mangoes, and they ate and chatted, and even laughed, in the freshness of the early morn. There was never fear nor protestation between them afterwards.

Early in the day they reached the *ranchito*, where there was but a single hut, and there they feasted on such fare as never before had passed Carmen's lips. But for all its coarseness it seemed the most delicious she had ever tasted. They were still on the lands of Tlaltelzingo. Carmen had been born to the right to command all within its borders, but now she could not remain even within its poorest hut. After eating they hurried away, carrying with them a store of bread. The woman, as they paid her from some copper coins Cosme possessed, eyed them suspiciously, and told them that word had been sent to every hut at the foot of the mountain that the heiress of Tlaltelzingo had been *plajiado* upon her wedding day by a low-born murderer. All had been warned, upon pain of death, from giving the guilty couple aid. 'For the strangest thing of all,' added the woman, 'is that the lady loves the wretch who carried her away.'

Carmen caught the glance of Cosme and

smiled. The simple woman went on to describe the gorgeous apparel she supposed the bride must have worn. So much was she absorbed in its fancied glories that, though the black shawl Carmen wore was an unusual luxury for the wife of a charcoal burner, or a *ranchera*, as she was supposed to be, the gossip had no eyes for it. That, and the shabby and ragged cloth dress, attracted the attention so little that it was not until some days later the woman connected these apparently humble wayfarers with the fugitives whom the *rurales* so eagerly inquired for.

Luckily Carmen left the hut before the woman, who had in all her talk evinced that inquisitive tendency to sympathy which is almost universally extended to unfortunate or romantic lovers, casually remarked that had not Cosme Rul killed Don Isidor—most worthy Senor—she herself would have been inclined to risk much to help him, but that, like all the country folk, she looked upon him as a monster, and could only wish the *rurales* Godspeed, and a swift bullet to the villain. Her child at that moment attracted her attention by a cry from its hammock, and Cosme turned from her without a word of farewell, and rejoined Carmen with a face that looked bloodless in the glare of the sun.

She was startled, but he was able to restrain

his emotion and withhold tidings which he knew would be most agonising to her, and make still more difficult the trials of her situation. With a joy and wonderment that ever increased he comprehended that he was to be her husband could they escape, and it was with deep satisfaction he convinced himself that the accident to Don Isidor was not due to him. Even in the excitement of the attack he had guarded against such a catastrophe. Still, had he thought it well to inform Carmen of the tragedy, he could have offered no proof that a bullet from his weapon had not brought it about.

Terribly disquieted as he was, he made a supreme effort not only to hide the matter from Carmen but to actually lighten the way by such jests and tales as are appreciated by both high and low. Carmen's spirits rose as his own declined, for she did not yet know, as he did, that they dared not approach any other habitation, and that the precious cakes he carried were the only cooked food they might hope to taste while they were upon the mountain—the great 'pico del hambre.'

It soon became apparent to him that their presence there was known with certainty by their pursuers. The smoke still rose sullenly from the foot of the height and the ravines through which they had ascended, and at night

the flames quivered dully in the moonlight. Had he been alone Cosme would doubtless have found a way to escape by agility or cunning, but he was hopelessly encumbered by Carmen whose person there was no means of disguising, and whose strength soon failed her. It was a secret and grievous surprise to the *peon* to learn how great a difference there is in the physical endurance of a woman of his own caste and that of Carmen. His mother or sister would have trudged undismayed at his side where she stumbled and fell. Yet under a tithe of her mental sufferings they would have lain down to die in despair, while she staggered onward with a courage and determination greater than his own. At sight of this his first and purest adoration returned. Haggard, wasted as she was, she seemed in his eyes a being of a higher world rather than a woman.

More than once they were forced to fly before the approach of bands of wandering soldiers, and they marvelled that the traces of blood left by the shoeless feet of Carmen did not betray them. They were compelled to scale the bare face of the cliffs as they neared the summit of the mountain, and to hide in caves and dens, from which they were sometimes warned by the hiss of the great boa-like snakes that lay in

them or which issued to bask in the mid-day sun. Once a mountain lion suddenly rose from a corner of a cave they had entered. Carmen threw herself then into the arms of Cosme. She was too wretched to fear him, and Cosme held the exhausted woman to his heart, and warmed her into life as though she were an infant, then in the dim light of dawn carried her up to the crest of the mountain and began the descent of the opposite side, which he anticipated would still be to a great extent unguarded.

He hoped to reach a tiny village that lay in a tract of country so rough and hilly that it was almost impassable to horsemen, and which it would take foot soldiers many days to reach, even if it was thought worth while to garrison so remote and insignificant a place. But the hunted creatures were driven back by the sight of both military and country people. At the latter Cosme ground his teeth in impotent rage, for he thought them traitors to their caste, and knew well that they were far more likely than the soldiers to guess his hiding-places.

The fugitives had lost sight of Tlaltelzingo, but, as though in mockery, they could follow, twice in the day, with longing eyes, the course of the locomotive, and torment themselves with visions of the scenes of plenty through which

it would pass. There was no water upon the heights to which they were forced, and no herbage of any kind except the scant *nopales*. But for these they must have died. There were times when they dared not venture out of their rocky dens even to pluck the withering fruit, for, actuated by hope of the great reward offered, the whole mountain became alive with men.

One day Carmen sprang to her feet with wild joy and declared she heard the voice of Fernando. She listened breathlessly for a moment. Then the light upon her face died out. 'It is indeed he,' she said. Then she clasped the hand of Cosme and looked into his face with despair. He fell at her feet and entreated her to summon her brother.

'You will be safe with him,' he cried; 'he will forgive. You may still live and be happy.'

'For me life, for you death!' she cried. 'No, no, it cannot be.'

The voices and footsteps of men died in the distance. Cosme threw himself at her feet and entreated her in vain, but she would not yield. 'They would kill you,' was her unanswerable argument. 'No, never will I yield myself if you are to die.' She held him with a clutch as of

death lest he should leave her, and for the first time since he was a child the man covered his face and burst into a passion of tears.

There were hours through this terrible time when she was even gay, and talked to Cosme in whispers, broken by little ripples of laughter, of what they would do when they had found their way out of this snare. She would point to the train as it rounded the curve of the distant mountains, and say how they would reach it some wonderful day, and would creep aboard and be borne far away to the beautiful valley of Mexico, where they would wander afoot to a tiny *rancho* which had been left to her by her mother, and there rest and be happy. Rest. Rest. That was all that they could think of or hope for. As he bound up her poor wounded feet with strips from his own clothing, or tempted her to eat some morsel from which her soul revolted, Cosme would listen as to some sweet song. He would echo her hopes, and smile, then go out and shake his fist fiercely at his enemies, visible or invisible, then drop his head upon his hands and groan in impotent agony. The more bitter because he realised that there was no return for Carmen to her true life, even though they reached the goal they dreamed of.

Yet those moments of tender intercourse made every struggle for life worth the effort it cost, and strengthened them to resist the coma of exhaustion and inanition which at times almost lulled them into oblivion.

At length, fearing that they would succumb did they longer remain inactive, Cosme resolved to load his pistols with the last cartridges in his belt and essay the descent of the mountain, turning back for no man. Carmen, equally desperate, urged him to dare the dangers of the day rather than wait for the night. She felt that a few more hours of suspense and starvation would turn her brain, and if she was to die, she prayed that she might do so while she was still conscious of her fate.

CHAPTER XVI

GAUNT and famished, they stole from their lair one morning just as day broke, and saw the clouds floating below them lightly. Oh! so lightly, so softly! What a downy bed they would have made could the wayfarers have thrown themselves upon them. The birds were flying eastward to meet the sun with joyous gyrations and shrill salutations, mocking their own silence and weary movements. The wide expanse of earth and air seemed the very domain of freedom, yet they crept forward like creatures weighted with chains, bending almost to the ground, their eyes strained, their ears alert to every sound that fell upon the clear vibrating air. An occasional glimpse of a fire or its smoke warned them away from clusters of men, whose dingy blankets rendered them scarcely distinguishable among the rocks, and until the sun rose they were themselves equally blended with the general greyness of their surroundings. In the uncertain light they made

some progress towards the belt of trees in which they hoped to find shelter, although they knew it was infested with their foes. But when full daylight shone upon them they only dared to move at rare intervals, and from want of food, and the difficulties of the ground, Carmen's strength became so exhausted that when the burning sun of noonday beat full upon them and made a very furnace of the rocks, the forest seemed a mocking mirage in the distance, and she was tempted to fall into shrieks of despair. Madness was seizing upon her brain, and was at once a horror and stimulus. Under its impulse she staggered on when Cosme himself faltered. Yet more than once she fell against him or clutched his arm in deadly faintness, from which he roused her with his endearments and his tears—a man's tears of agony. More than once he tottered under a like exhaustion, and drew up his belt, or pushed back his black hair with a hand that shook like a woman's.

In one of their forced pauses a dog ran up to them, panting so hard from the ascent in the rarified atmosphere that it had no power to bark as it scented them. Cosme stunned it with one blow of his pistol hilt, and killed it with another. Apparently the animal was a scout,

or the dull thud of the blows penetrated far through the clear atmosphere, for voices were heard calling and answering, and presently four men passed in Indian file upon the further side of the rock behind which the fugitives lay.

‘There is nothing more certain than that they are upon this mountain,’ said one, a villager whom Cosme knew. ‘If the Senor Capitan would follow my advice, he would send hounds into the caves upon the summit and dislodge them, but he says that is not a method for soldiers. Well, if the method of soldiers is followed a little longer I know Cosme Rul well enough to know he will escape. One must hunt the devil after his own manner,’ and the men passed on, grumbling.

Cosme drew Carmen still farther downward to what they hoped would prove indeed the way of liberty. The possibility of it, of which the man had hinted, cheered them like a prophecy, and they had almost reached the longed-for belt of trees when they saw more than a score of armed men scattered through the wood. Among them they recognised Fernando and Norberto Sanchez.

Carmen staggered back against a great rock upon which the sun beat fiercely, but which hid her from the oncoming men; and Cosme,

pistol in hand, fell upon his knees, his eyes following every movement. There was apparently a slight altercation between the captain of the *rurales* and Fernando, and in a momentary pause of the men Cosme heard a hollow voice utter his name so faintly and with such sepulchral horror that it seemed to come from the earth rather than from any living creature. Then again. It was the voice of Carmen.

Could she indeed have called him thus?

Yes. The unfortunate girl stood motionless, her hand upon the rock, and round her shrunken arm were the coils of a great grey snake, one of the boas so common in the district. The creature was swaying its head to make another coil or to fasten its fangs in its victim's breast, and she was looking at it with fascinated horror and moaning through motionless lips, 'Cosme, Cosme.'

To fire upon the reptile was perhaps to kill his adored, surely to bring upon them their pursuers; but he had no weapon but his pistol, and his hesitation did not last the hundredth part of an instant. The ball sped, the head of the serpent flew like a bird through the air, and the body tightened in one frightful contraction, then relaxed and fell upon the rock, and Cosme caught the fainting girl in his arms.

But there was no time for words ; the pistol shot had proved a traitor even while it saved. With shouts and triumphant yells the soldiers rushed up the rocks. There was no concerted method of attack and no defence was possible. Cosme fired at the first comer, who dropped, only to form a stepping-stone for others. Someone called out for them to surrender, but Carmen, with a mad light in her eyes, cried, ' Never ! '

At the same moment there was a fusilade from the foremost soldiers, and those behind waited for no further parley. Cosme Rul, upon his knees, scanning the on-comers with the gaze of a lynx, felt the balls sting him like hail, but held his fire until the hands of the soldiers were nearly upon him. He saw a man at the tree line who was shouting with mad gesticulations, ' No quarter for Cosme Rul ! No quarter for the bandit and murderer ! '

He glanced at his pistol, it held but two charges, then threw his head back with a momentary glance at Carmen, whose face was like a death mask, her eyes starting from their hollow sockets. Blood was pouring from Cosme like streams from a rock. She looked upon him as she had upon the serpent—the symbol of death—and muttered, ' Cosme, Cosme, Cosme.'

‘See! There are two bullets,’ he cried. ‘One for me and one for thee.’

She stepped eagerly forward; a terrible spasm contracted his face. He looked again at the man at the tree line. ‘No! For him and for me!’ he cried, and, stooping, took careful aim. The men before him might have arrested him had they not been so dazed. An instant, and the shot rang out—a scream—a cry. Another shot, and Cosme Rul staggered backward and fell at Carmen’s feet.

She threw herself distractedly upon him, and clasped his head to her breast, reproaching him that he had not given her the shot he had wasted in his last revenge. He was not quite dead, and looked up, murmuring her name. She stooped and kissed him wildly, then slowly, sweetly. He died with those first and last kisses on his lips.

The last agony of Norberto Sanchez no one saw. But they found him stretched face downward at the line of trees, and the soldiers carried both the dead men down into the valley and laid them in peaceful graves. Over one of them no prayers were read.

Of Carmen the tale is not ended, and no one knows whether the riot of madness or the peace of resignation marks the course of her

days. But, strangely, the voice of Scandal died before the record of her heroic lover.

As the train passes and Tlaltelzingo looms in the distance, many an eye is strained to catch a glimpse of the frail figure of a woman who often stands upon the sunlit balcony over the archway. As she, draped in black, remains motionless, a child plays around her. He is the son of Pedro Ortiz, the step-brother of Cosme Rul; now christened with his name. Sometimes a young girl leads the child away or lays her hand gently upon the lady's arm. But Carmen, if she it is, takes no heed or only lifts her eyes or hand towards the fatal mountain. She seems but a dream-woman in this tragedy of to-day. Even the tale itself is deemed to be but one of the myths of this changing land. Her own people are silent when strangers ask whether it be true or false. And, by the curious traveller, as the train rushes into the commonplace ways of opening settlements and crowded cities; the passion and folly of the lady of Tlaltelzingo are forgotten, or confused with the legends of the romantic past.

THE END

